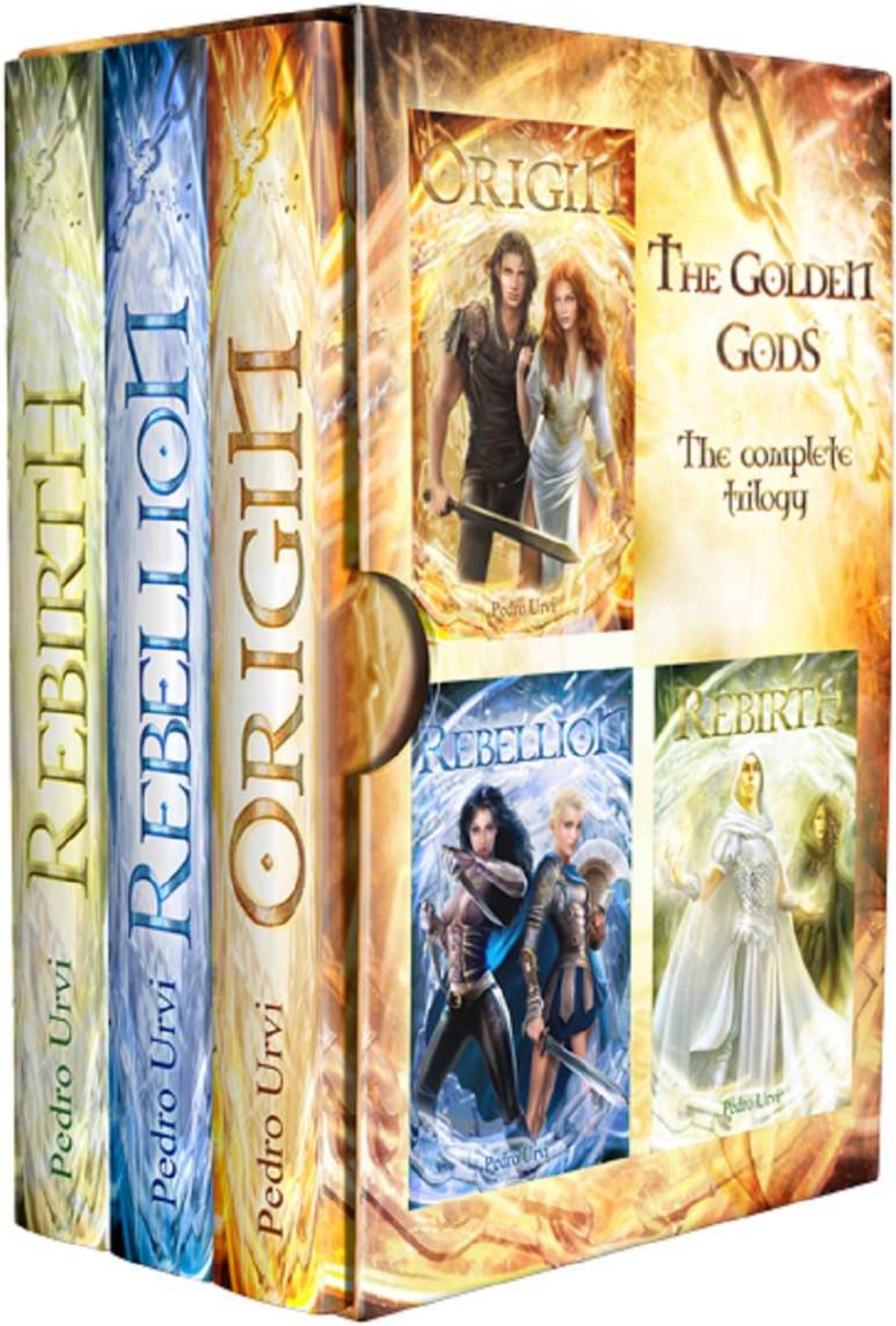
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To my father, my number one fan, always.

ORIGIN
Pedro Urvi

ORIGIN

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To my father, my number one fan, always.

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Prologue

Legends tell that the Golden Gods appeared to the first men one evening under a full red moon.

The Senoca, the people of the sea, welcomed them humbly and offered them gifts, but the all-powerful Gods demanded slavery. The Senoca turned to Oxatsi, Mother Sea, and they fought them in the battle field, defending their sacred freedom.

The Golden Gods made the sky explode in a rain of fire and caused the earth to break up and devour men.

The Senoca were defeated and were enslaved for a thousand years.

1

The Ring on his left wrist vibrated.

Ikai looked at it and a white radiance burst in his mind.

"*The Hill of Skies, in three days,"* was his Master's message.

I'm summoned… I must leave.

He stared for a moment at the polished surface of the golden metal, the hated Ring which marked the whole Senoca people as slaves of the Golden Gods. His eyes ran over the contours of the intricate engraving of the bracelet: an eagle with extended wings, the Hunters' symbol. Hunters of men, at the service of the Gods. Ikai closed his eyes, shaking his head, and sighed.

He finished adjusting the armor of reinforced leather, enough to save him from a sword-strike if it was not too accurate, or the mauling of a wild beast, but it would not protect him from anything worse. He picked up his sword, the throwing dagger, the yew bow and his traveling bag with the rest of his Hunter equipment. He crossed the common area of the humble farm and went outside. The sun received him with a gentle winter smile which warmed his body with its morning glow. In the Sixth County, the climate was warm for most of the year, one of the few blessings of the region as it was the poorest of the six Senoca counties.

Dazzled, Ikai leaned on the out-of-joint door frame, the adobe wall had settled again. The building was so rudimentary that any day now it would collapse. But it was the same with all the farms in the area, where hungry slave peasants struggled day after day to survive, to fulfill the quotas demanded by the Gods. Many did not manage it. He shaded his eyes with his hand and saw them. His mother and sister were working hard in the field, as they did every morning with the first light, as they did every new day. He watched his sister Kyra and his mood lightened. She helped their mother, Solma, to till the hard soil which barely fed them. He went to them with a smile in his soul.

“Ikai!” cried his sister when she saw him arrive. She dropped the hoe and ran to him.

Ikai watched her run like the wind— at her seventeen springs she was a year younger than he was, but almost the same height. She was pure nerve, as her thin, wiry body attested. Her tongue, though, was as fiery as her red hair, which had already created more than one complication. But Kyra’s heart was noble and her character indomitable, like the ruby gleam of her eyes. Ikai adored his sister and envied her lively, unbreakable spirit.

“Hold your reins, little sis, you’re going to make me fall,” Ikai said with a guffaw, trying to keep his balance with his sister hanging from his neck.

How different they were as siblings… both in looks and in character. He was like their father, Siul: tall, broad-shouldered and strong-armed, with straight brown shoulder-length hair and those damned eyes… his weird eyes… which everybody noticed and frowned upon: one intense emerald green and the other pale blue, almost grey, just like their father’s. His character was also his father’s, but much calmer: patient and peaceful, totally unlike his sister. Kyra had inherited their mother’s physical traits, fortunately. But nobody knew where she had got her volcanic temperament from.

“Are you leaving again? You only just got here!” said Kyra reproachfully, taking a step back. Her eyes were fixed on the weapons Ikai carried, and her face hardened.

Ikai lowered his eyes. “I’ve been summoned…”

Kyra frowned, and her eyes sparkled. “You shouldn’t go with them, you know. What you do is wrong.”

Unable to look her in the eye, Ikai remained silent. “Let your brother be, he does what he’s told, for us, for his family,” scolded her mother, panting from the effort.

Ikai watched Solma come up to them, a hoe in her hand. The strength of this woman made his eyes moist. She had raised them both practically on her own. The Eyes-of-the-God had taken their father soon after Ikai turned ten, they never heard from him again. Ikai thought him dead, since those the Enforcers of the Gods took away ended up in the mines or the Eternal City, the Gods’ dwelling. And nobody returned from there alive. Solma had raised them with great economy in order to fulfill the quotas, and even now

that she was sick in the lungs she still struggled on their behalf, going out to work in the field every morning only to be forced to stop before noon with blood at the corners of her mouth, beaten by the illness.

“I don’t want him to do anything for me. Not for those false Gods and the despots who serve them among our people!” cried Kyra, clenching her fists.

Solma and Ikai straightened up, as if whipped by fear, and remained stiff.

“Kyra, be quiet, for the sake of our lives!” Solma scolded in a hoarse whisper, fear shadowing her face.

Ikai looked around at once, fear lying on his chest like a slab of stone. If a Proxy of the Regent had heard her she would end up in the quarry, or something worse… Luckily there was nobody near, only acres and acres of tilled fields and a few crows on a distant fence to the east. “Kyra, be careful, you mustn’t raise your voice like that, you put yourself in danger… you put all of us in danger. If they take you away I won’t be able to do anything for you. The privileges of my position as a Hunter are few…”

Kyra shook her fiery mane and seemed to reflect. “All right,” she protested, waving her hands. “I only say what we all think,” she said in a low voice, and kicked a clot of dirt.

“I know you don’t approve of what I do, but it lets us obtain coin, and that allows me to buy medicine in Osaen, for Mother, for you. Very few can…”

“We’ll find another way, don’t sell your soul to the Gods for a few coins. If we sell ourselves, if we give up and become absolutely submissive to those pitiless Gods, we’ll remain a slave people for all eternity.”

“It’s the only way I have…”

“We’re the Senoca, the People of the Sea. Look at us, Ikai,” Kyra said, pointing at the fields around them. “They deny us the sea, they force us to work the fields without pause, starving us with quotas we can’t fulfill. We have nothing. We are nothing but a slave people.”

Ikai swallowed. “We are slaves of the Golden, and so it has been for more than a thousand years. It’s not going to change today.”

“And so it will go on if we don’t do something.”

“Why are you like this today?”

Kyra raised her hands to the sky and cried out in rage.

“Ughhhhh! You’re right, it’s just that today is not just any day and I wanted to spend it with you, I don’t want to see you go…”

Ikai smiled. “You remembered?”

“How could I forget, tuna head!” Kyra said, laughing, and pushed him hard.

“Happy birthday, my son!” Solma said, and a wide smile lit up her face. For a moment Ikai saw his mother happy, something which rarely happened, and the good woman’s face seemed to be rejuvenated. For a brief moment the lost beauty Ikai remembered surged up from her joyful heart.

“Thanks, Mother,” said Ikai with a look of tender understanding, which his mother returned. Seeing her happy, even for just a moment, was the best gift Ikai could wish for.

“I can’t believe you’re eighteen already. You’re a man. The man of the family. You’re so much like your father…” she said stroking his hair. “Remember your father, remember the family, that must always come first. Keep it in mind, my son. Without a family we’re nothing more than a speck of dust carried away by the wind.”

Ikai nodded and smiled at her gratefully.

“I have a gift for you, come with me,” Kyra said, sounding happier now. “It’s a surprise. I think you’ll like it.” She took his hand and led him to the back of the house.

A centenary oak rose there like an imposing guardian protecting the small, humble dwelling. Kyra bent over the massive roots and picked up an object wrapped in a linen cloth.

“Here, it’s for you,” she said with a smile, impatience gleaming in her ruby eyes.

Ikai unwrapped the object and uncovered a leather string with a wood carving: a perfectly detailed seahorse. He looked at it with his mouth open.

“It’s… it’s beautiful…”

“Then, you like it?”

“Like it? I love it!”

Kyra hugged her brother and shook him, happiness all over her face. It made Ikai’s heart leap with joy.

“Thank you very much, little sis,” he said, and hung it around his neck.

Ikai sighed. He worried about Kyra. Lately her overwhelming vitality was dwindling; the scarcity of food was reducing the flames of her spirit to embers, no matter how much she tried to hide it. Ikai was well aware that his sister was hungry, just as their mother was, just as the whole Senoca people were. Hunger, a slave people's fate. Too few were the days when they had enough to eat; even fewer those when they went to sleep with something hot in their stomachs.

"There, you're lost in the depths of the sea of thoughts again," said Kyra, as she passed her hand in front of his contrasting eyes.

Ikai smiled and looked into her eyes.

"There's something else I want to show you," she said, weighing a dagger in her hand with an intriguing look.

"What's that?"

Kyra took six careful steps away from the oak. She pointed with her left hand. "See that knot?"

Ikai nodded. It was half way up the trunk, a lump the size of a small apple.

With a flash, Kyra reached behind her head with her right hand and threw the dagger. It stuck right in the center of the knot.

Ikai opened his eyes wide with shock. He himself would not have been able to hit the target at that distance, and he had been trained in the use of weapons since the age of twelve, when he had joined the Hunters. "Awesome. I see you've been practicing what I taught you."

"Whenever I can. I like it when you show me how to fight, it makes me feel stronger, braver and safer."

"You're an amazing thrower, much better than I…"

"Unfortunately I'm no good with the sword," she admitted. "We must train more."

"When I come back, I promise."

Kyra nodded, happy.

"But remember what I always tell you: what I teach you is for your own protection; don't let anybody see that you know how to fight. It's forbidden by the law of the Gods. If a Proxy discovers you you'll be sent to the quarries, to forced labor."

“They won’t discover me, those sons of a hyena rarely visit the fields. They prefer the city and the bigger villages where there’s some comfort.”

Ikai was not happy about his sister’s reply. The danger was very real. Very few men were allowed to carry weapons; they were only slaves. The Proxies under command of the Regent Sesmok kept firm control. Carrying a weapon without permission was considered an offense against the Golden Gods, and any offense against the divinities was punished with death. The slaves could not be armed; the Gods made sure of that through their servants among men.

“Don’t be so trusting. If instead of a Proxy an Eye-of-the-God discovers you, an Enforcer of the Gods, he’ll kill you. And the Eyes, with their Executors, roam the six counties, controlling everything that happens, directly informing the gods.” Ikai shook his head. “You must be more careful about everything. I don’t know who puts those rebel ideas in your stubborn, crazy head, but you must learn to stay quiet or we’ll all end up dead. If you don’t want to do it for me, at least do it for Mother. She couldn’t bear to lose you, you know that. Not after Father.”

Kyra’s expression changed at the mention of their father. A shadow fell on her face, the light in her eyes went out and she bent her head. She was thoughtful for a moment. She sighed deeply, as if letting out all her wariness.

“All right, for Mother I’ll stay quiet, but that won’t change the way I feel.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Ikai’s Ring vibrated again. His mind was filled by a white luminosity and an image was projected into his mind. His Hunting Party was calling; he had to leave.

“Go, don’t worry,” Kyra said. “I’ll take care of Mother and the farm.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Kyra kissed his cheek in farewell.

“May the depth of Mother Sea guide your head, and her greatness be in your soul.”

“Thank you, little sis,” replied Ikai. “We are the Senoca; from Mother Sea we come and to Mother Sea we shall return.”

After giving their mother a farewell hug, Ikai traveled west for three days until he reached the Hill of Skies. From the top he could see a great part of the Sixth County. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked out over the landscape, which was something he always liked to do. Countless tilled fields extended among the tributaries of the great river. Most Senoca families lived off cereals and fruits and depended on the benevolence of the floods from the great river. They were a people of farmers, they lived and died by the grace of the harvests, at the mercy of the weather and the river.

Ikai shook his head. *We are the Senoca, the people of the Sea, condemned by the Gods to work the fields eternally. We, who once rode the waves proudly and sailed the oceans pushed by the winds, will never set eyes on our beloved Mother Sea again.*

Six armed men arrived at the summit. Ikai took a good look at them. They were young men, strong and with rough faces: fighters. After them came their leader, a middle-aged man, tall, strong, of imposing bearing. His weathered face was marked by a tremendous scar which ran down the right side from temple to chin. His long black hair was braided in the old-fashioned style. His eyes were black as a moonless night and shone intensely. Ikai knew it was with intelligence.

“Hunter Ikai,” he greeted hoarsely.

“Master Hunter Sejof,” Ikai replied respectfully, with a slight bow.

“The Hunters have been summoned,” Sejof said in a solemn voice.

They all went down on one knee, presented their rings with the eagle symbol and looked at their leader. Ikai nodded at Ismes and smiled at Yestas. He knew the group well; he had trained with them for years under their Master’s command. Ismes and Yestas were like brothers to Ikai. Sejof took out a thick crystalline disc and held it in one hand, on which he wore an arcane gauntlet. Both gauntlet and disc were made by the Gods. Ikai stared at the golden pip in the heart of the disc. Sejof placed it over the Ring on his left arm. He ran the artifact over the royal eagle engraving which identified him. The ring flashed, as if replying to the disc. It rose above the Ring, and the Master moved his hand away. The disc remained hovering in the air a hand-span above his arm, then began to gleam with an intense

silver light. Ikai had already witnessed that ritual before, but it never ceased to fascinate him. The disc sent out a beam of silver light towards the northeast, then after a moment, stopped shining.

“We’ll camp here. Leave at dawn,” Sejof ordered, pointing in the direction the disc had shown.

“How many fugitives, Master?”

“Half a dozen.”

“They won’t manage to cross.”

“I’m afraid this time is different. I’ve a bad feeling,” Sejof said, putting the disc away.

Ikai looked at him, surprised. No one could cross, no one who was not an Enforcer of the Gods or a Hunter in their service. But he nodded and prepared mentally for a new hunt.

With the first light the Hunters set out. They marched for ten days at a hunting pace until they reached the great forests in the West. They followed the direction indicated by the disc until they found the fugitives’ trail. When they came close to the Boundary they stopped.

Sejof checked the trees around.

“Find the spot where they tried to cross.”

The seven men left at once. It did not take them long to find it. Ismes pointed it out: “It was here, Master.”

They gathered around the spot. Ikai looked at what his fellow hunter was pointing and was speechless. On the ground he could make out a thin gold line, almost translucent, but which became more solid the more he looked at it. It was the Boundary established by the Golden Gods. No man could cross it. A terrible death awaited those who tried to do so without permission from the Gods. Ikai had seen it before; it was certainly atrocious. But what shocked him was that the trail crossed the barrier and continued on the other side.

It’s happened. They’ve crossed. But it can’t be. The Rings of the Gods can’t be broken, they’re made of a material which resists fire and steel. Nobody can find freedom. Nobody can cross and escape. How did they do it?

“By all that’s sacred!” Sejof exclaimed, looking worried. He bent over to look at the prints and shook his head, then straightened up and looked at

his men.

“Not a word to anyone, your life is at stake!” he said in a tone which left no room for doubt.

The Hunters nodded.

If this were known… there’d be hope… we could all escape the confinement we’re subjected to. But it would bring death… Ikai thought, his mind troubled. He remembered his sister’s determined face. She would try to cross it without a second thought if she knew there was a possibility. And she would die. He shook his head. Ikai recalled one of his first hunts, when a poor man had amputated his ringed arm, thinking he could cross that way. Ikai had tried to stop him, but he had been too late. The poor wretch crossed. When his body came in contact with the barrier he went up in flames. He died, charred, amid screams of agony.

The Master Hunter took a step toward the discovery, following the trail, and stretched out his arm. The Ring buzzed jarringly, and Sejof’s arm began to tremble violently.

“The Boundary,” he said with a grunt of pain.

The Hunters caught up with him and stretched out their arms. The shaking began at once.

Ikai took a deep breath. He stepped forward with his arm extended so that the Hunter’s badge of his Ring would cross the forbidden fringe, announcing to the Gods that one of their Hunters was going to cross over. The Ring gave off a silver gleam on contact with the barrier and Ikai saw the eagle engraving shine strongly. He had been announced. He passed his whole body across. Spasms of pain overwhelmed him as he crossed the translucent barrier. He fell to the ground amid uncontrolled convulsions, in visceral torment. His mind exploded in pain and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he did not know where he was or how long it had been. His whole body, his mind, were still undergoing torture as if thousands of hot pins were being stuck in him. But he was alive. The Gods had allowed him to cross. He looked around and saw his fellow hunters trying to recover, just as he was. Sejof was already standing and scanning the forest with his bow at the ready. Ikai prepared his, nocked an arrow and stood beside the Master while he tried to clear his mind. A moment later Ismes, Yestas and the rest of the group were with them, their weapons at the ready.

“Let’s go. The trail goes into the woods, to the north.”

The group of hunters made their way into the forest. The trail was easy to follow, even on that abrupt terrain and among the dense vegetation. Although the Hunters were expert trackers, on this occasion even a blind man could have followed the trail. The more they advanced, the wilder and more primitive the forest and flora around them became. Ikai knew it would be the same with the fauna, and this made him uneasy.

Suddenly Sejof stopped and crouched. They all followed his example. Ikai could smell danger — or was it something else? It was… blood. Sejof made a sign, and they gathered around him in a semicircle. Ikai looked at the ravine in front of them. Sejof pointed two fingers to his eyes and then south. In the deepest part, by a brook, Ikai saw bushes with abundant blood which stained the water red. They watched for a while in silence, waiting tensely, but there did not seem to be anything alive down there. Sejof gestured to Ikai, Ismes and Yestas to follow him, and the four began their descent into the ravine. From their elevated position on the edge the other hunters covered them with their bows in case of any threat.

They reached the bottom of the ravine with some difficulty and went to the place where the blood contaminated the crystal clear brook. They moved carefully, on the alert, following the trail of blood as far as a sharp bend. Ikai looked ahead and was left stunned and speechless. In the deepest part of the ravine, lay half a dozen bodies grotesquely mauled and piled up. Wherever they looked, there was blood and the human remains of some terrible butchery. Not even Sejof could react. The four of them stayed staring at the macabre scene.

“What… what beast could do a thing like this?” Ikai managed to mutter at last.

“It must have been a bloodthirsty pack… of beasts,” Ismes said with a frown.

“Yes, but what kind of beasts?” Yestas asked uneasily.

Sejof shook his head and moved forward warily. He examined the first bodies and came back.

“It’s them,” he said. “Their escape ended here, here ends our hunt. What’s killed them is something that doesn’t concern us. We’re hunters of men, at the service of the Gods. When the prey dies, the hunt is over. We’re going back.”

Ikai felt a chill run down his back as if someone had poured a pitcher of cold water over him. Out here they were not the predator kings. The Gods had erected the Boundary to prevent their slaves from escaping, and for more than a thousand years the predators had reigned and evolved at leisure beyond it, without any contact with humans. This was wild territory, and extremely dangerous.

We'd better get out of here, the sooner the better.

Suddenly, a chilling roar sounded behind, above them. The four turned with bows ready, hearts beating like galloping horses. They heard screams and a tremendous bray. Two of the hunters toppled off the top of the ravine and fell to the ground.

"Damnation! Cover them!" shouted Sejof, and they ran to them.

Ikai looked at his fallen comrades, and his blood froze in his veins. Kilten's thorax was open from side to side, as if the huge claw of a wild animal had mauled him. He was dead. *A bear or a tiger of enormous size,* he thought. Moltes was still breathing, but there was a terrible bite on one shoulder and lacerations in his stomach.

"Help…" he moaned, his eyes on Ikai.

Above, they heard more screams and roaring; the fight was still going on. They raised their bows, but they could not see more than shadows above the undergrowth.

"We have no shot!" cried Sejof. "Ismes! Yestas! With me! Ikai, you stay, don't let him die."

"Yes, Master!" replied Ikai as he saw them running uphill through the brush.

He bent over, putting his bow aside, and tore off a piece of his tunic to improvise a bandage. His comrade was losing a lot of blood and he had to act quickly.

"Easy, Moltes, I'll patch you up, you won't die." He pressed the wound and bandaged it. "Hold on, pal, hold on," he encouraged him, trying to hide his anguish.

Suddenly an enormous shadow flew over him, followed by a dull sound and the crushing of branches and brush, Ikai looked up in alarm. As though from a nightmare, a huge beast appeared before him. He saw an enormous body with matted fur covered in dirt and blood. A wild bear head

roared defiantly. The beast was huge; standing on its two legs it was more than a head taller than he was himself. Ikai's heart nearly jumped out of his mouth as he stood up. He took out his sword. The touch of the cold metal pommel awoke the trained warrior inside him, displacing his fear. With his other hand he grasped the dagger he carried at his belt.

A huge claw searched for his neck. His reflexes and Hunting training took over. He threw himself to one side to avoid the claw. The beast roared again and lunged at him. Ikai thrust the sword in deep, feeling for the heart. He received a brutal claw blow in his side. Pain burst out in his mind but he did not budge. He knifed the beast again and again with both weapons, trying to hit some vital organ. A new laceration on his chest made him cringe with pain. But in his mind there was only one idea: he had to keep stabbing or die.

The open jaws of the beast went for his face. The stench of its breath invaded him and he was overwhelmed by fear. He was lost. All of a sudden the beast arced and roared in furious rage. At the top of the gully Ikai saw his comrades shooting at the monster. But the beast tried to claw his neck. Seeing himself lost, Ikai tried to protect himself with his arm. The fangs of the beast bit into it hard, only to meet the Ring on his wrist. Ikai knifed it again, this time in the neck. In the midst of a chilling roar he received a tremendous blow on his head and shoulder. The sword fell from his hand. He fell to his knees and was left helpless. Dizzily he tried to fix his gaze, but everything was blurred and he saw something strange, something that could not be: the eyes of the bear were not those of an animal; they looked human… but it could not be…

The beast brayed.

And darkness took him.

2

Kyra looked up from the pile of firewood and lowered the rudimentary axe her brother Ikai had made for her. She dried the perspiration from her brow and surveyed the fields. She had been working all day on the farm and exhaustion was depleting what little strength she had left. Every day she seemed to have less of it. Luckily night would soon come and she would be able to enjoy a frugal supper, which would not satisfy the hunger she felt, but which at least would be comforting enough.

She sighed and rubbed her stomach. She never ceased to be astounded by her mother's ability to make soups and stews out of so little. A few vegetables and roots from the garden, and she could prepare a comforting hot dish to fill a grateful stomach. But the scarcity of grain and the lack of meat were taking their toll. Every day they were a little thinner, a little weaker. Until Ikai's return they would not have coin to get more food and medicine with.

She looked at the fields beyond the north fence, which belonged to their neighbors, the Arken — suffering peasants like themselves. Kyra saw Colem, the patriarch, walk by, and wave at her. His two sons followed him, with his wife a little behind. They worked from sunrise to sunset, trying to feed their starving bodies. They were the living portrait of a society sunk in poverty and suffering. Scarcity and hunger spread like an epidemic among the peasants, already taxed with disproportionate quotas to satisfy the infinite vanity of the pitiless Gods.

"Hi there, Volte!" Kyra said, with a forced smile.

"Greetings, Kyra!" the youngest of the family replied, dull-eyed. He was as thin as an ear of wheat. Kyra shook her head, saddened.

"Damned Gods!" she muttered angrily under her breath. That was the way to keep them all under control: a people always on the verge of starvation, lacking any kind of vigor, incapable of rebellion.

And as if the punitive Gods could read Kyra's mind, she saw him appear, on the brow of the hill, on the path that led to the village. The hated

figure stopped and watched. Immediately he wrote something down in his strange silver book, the way they always did.

The damned Eye-of-the-Gods! The spy of the Golden.

The gaunt, somber being was dressed in the dreaded, unmistakable tunic of silver hemmed with gold, with strange runes that were incomprehensible to men. The rich garment covered him from neck to feet. His arms were bare, showing tanned ochre skin in which dark swollen veins were visible, as if instead of blood, dark ink flowed through them. His head was always covered by a sinister metallic helmet. The back of this was golden, as if it were made of pure, solid gold. The front was formed by two silver triangles, vertical, symmetrical and identical. One covered the left side of the face, the other the right. They were separated by a thin golden strip. Looking at the polished surface was like looking at a mirror that did not reflect any image

A shiver ran through Kyra, and the hair on the back of her neck bristled.

What's that monster doing here? she wondered. It had been a whole season since she had last seen them, and then she realized it was already the end of winter, the end of a new season, and the damned Eye was coming to collect. But after the long winter there was nothing left, they had nothing.

An angry fire stirred in her belly, and involuntarily she clutched the handle of the axe. She almost went up to him, but then she saw them. Straggling, a few steps behind: The Executors. They were armed with long spears of bright metal. They protected the Eye-of-the-God and administered the law of the Gods without hesitation.

Kyra counted a dozen in close formation. They wore tunics as red as the blood they shed of the people from whom they stripped the fruits of their toil. Their faces were always concealed by a strange helmet, like those of their masters. The back of the helmet was red, the front a silver diamond divided into two identical halves, which stood out from the face. But unlike the Eye-of-the-God's helmet, the division here was horizontal. The two triangles curved and lengthened at their ends, with the upper part covering the forehead and the lower the nose and mouth. A dark strip at eye level divided the two metal pieces.

No one had ever seen the faces hidden beneath those sinister helmets. The bright red of their tunics caught Kyra's eye, and anger stirred in her.

Over their tunic, covering chest and back, they wore a black cuirass, engraved in red with strange symbols which to her were indecipherable. Greaves and gauntlets, also in black, protected their legs and arms. A long red cape hung from their wide shoulders.

It was said that they had the strength of three men and the thirst for blood of a rabid beast. Kyra had heard rumors that they were like bloodhounds: once they scented blood they never stopped. Their skin was also dark ochre, and swollen black veins ran along their powerful muscles. They were hated as much as they were feared. Only a few brave dared speak to them, or even look at them.

After them, as was fitting given his inferior status, came a Proxy. He came forward in his elegant white tunic trimmed in blue and the symbol of the sun engraved on the chest. Several guards accompanied him. Kyra recognized him: it was Ambuk, the village Proxy.

Making way for their master, the Eye-of-the-God, the Executors came up to the Arkens. They immediately threw themselves on the ground in absolute submission, knowing their lives were in grave danger.

Rage inched across Kyra's chest and then her throat, forcing her to swallow. They had the village sunk in terror. The oppression and suffering they exerted were dreadful; a mere look, a gesture, an unfortunate comment were punished with death. The heartless Eyes-of-the-Gods, in their tireless duty, controlled each and every one of the villages, suffocating an enslaved people by means of the Law of the Gods.

Kyra watched as Colem begged the Eye for mercy.

"I don't have any more grain, I've got nothing left," he was saying, not even daring to look at the Enforcer of the Gods.

The Eye remained impassive, ignoring the farmer prostrate at his feet.

"I assure you, I'm not hiding anything," said Colem pleadingly.

Those swine always took away what little grain and food the families had saved in order to survive. The peasants begged tearfully and tried to hide all the cereal they could, but they were ruthlessly tortured until they ended up confessing. Kyra had witnessed impotently how some brave individuals gave their lives to save their families, refusing to reveal where they had hidden what little remained from the harvest. The Eyes-of-the-Gods tortured the poor wretches to death. Their cries of pain and terror were widespread all across the region.

Damned heartless serfs of soulless Gods!

Kyra tried to calm the fury within her, a rage she knew well and which cost her a great effort to control. She was well aware that no good would come of it. She would gladly tear out the Eye's heart, but she thought about her mother and brother, about how much they would suffer if they took her too… She bowed her head and sighed with deep sorrow. *They at least were still alive,* she told herself. Other families had already perished in the harsh winter or at the hands of the Eyes-of-the-Gods.

"No, please, we need the milk, we have nothing else. We'll die of starvation," Colem was saying desperately.

One of the Executors hit him in the ribs, and the poor man doubled up in pain. Volte tried to help his father, but was immediately subdued amid terrible blows.

Kyra took a step forward with the axe in her hand, and her rage was on the verge of exploding like an erupting volcano.

"Stay still!" came the order, in a gentle but forceful tone.

Kyra turned and saw Solma, hoe in one hand and a bunch of weeds from the garden in the other.

"They're taking everything, they'll starve them."

"There's nothing we can do for them."

"I'd gut him!"

"Kyra! Shut up! If they hear you they'll take you away like they did your father, and we'd never see you again."

"If I could kill just one of them, just one of those Enforcers, at least I'd have the satisfaction of having avenged him."

"Oh yes? And what good would come of that? There are Eyes-of-the-Gods, escorted by Executors, controlling the six counties. He'd soon be replaced by another from the Eternal City. And what do you think the punishment would be? They'd not only kill you and all your family, but all the families of the county would pay too. The Gods don't tolerate the slightest indiscipline. If any one hand rises against one of their Enforcers, our blood will bathe the earth, the blood of all the families. That's the Law of the Gods."

"Even so, we ought to confront them, show them we're not afraid of them."

“Who’s going to confront them, my child? There are barely any men left in the fields. Most of them have been sent to the quarries or the mines to get granite and the minerals they need for the building of their Eternal City. There are only elders and children left who can’t even wield a weapon. Who’s going to confront them? Us? The women?”

“I’m prepared to!”

“You’re young, and your head is filled with dangerous ideals, just like your father.”

Kyra sighed. She knew her mother was right, but her soul cried out at the injustices inflicted upon them.

“Tell me, Mother, what do you see?” she asked Solma, and showed her the Ring on her left hand.

“The Golden Ring… the one we all wear,” she replied, as though she feared what would come next.

“That’s it. A Ring they enslave us with, one they’ve used to subject our people for more than a thousand years. But it’s more than that, because the mark of the Ox it has engraved on it doesn’t only mean I’m a slave, but that I’m a farmer slave and that I can’t be anything else. I’m forced to work the fields for them, and that’s all I can do until the day I die.”

Solma looked at her own Ring, where the engraved Ox shone in the sun.

“And what will happen the day this farmer slave can’t pay the taxes the Gods demand?” she said, looking at the Eye-of-the-God, while acid rage rose to her mouth.

“Kyra…”

“Tell me, Mother, what do they do with those who aren’t productive any longer?”

Solma shook her head, her eyes sunk deep in a well of sorrow.

“They’ll kill me, they’ll kill us, with no mercy. Don’t you see, Mother? We’re doomed, and we always will be.”

“Kyra, it’s not the time for this discussion. Proxy Ambuk is watching us.”

“Let him watch, he won’t intervene, he won’t help a poor peasant family, not in front of the Enforcers.”

“The Proxy represents the Regent’s law among the Senoca.”

“Sure, as if we didn’t know that he’s just a puppet who serves them. They’re all the same, corrupt Proxies serving a Regent who’s a puppet of the Golden himself. They starve the people with taxes and it doesn’t mean anything to them, they live like kings in luxurious houses and palaces, all at our expense.”

“Kyra, please…”

“We’re nothing more than slaves, doomed to work and suffer a life of poverty until death. There’s no hope.”

“But we’re alive, our family’s still alive, and that’s what matters in the end. The family must survive, above all else. Take care of your family and stay alive, no matter how difficult the situation is, no matter how much hardship we have to bear, because that’s the only way to survive.”

“Survive to suffer a life like this…” Kyra shook her head.

“Don’t talk like that, we’re alive. You, Ikai, me. We love each other and we have each other. Think about that. Hold on to that.”

Kyra gave a long sigh…

“Will our fate change some day, Mother?”

“I keep that hope in my heart. And if not now, then some other time, but come it will. That’s why we have to take care of each other and survive, the family above all, Kyra. We must stay together, stay strong and survive.”

“All right, Mother,” Kyra said, bowing her head in resignation.

The Eye-of-the-God turned and looked in their direction. The sun shone on the polished metallic surface of his sinister helmet.

“On your knees, he’s looking at us,” Solma said. There was fear in her voice as she knelt down hurriedly.

“Come on, Kyra, on your knees,” she urged.

Kyra remained standing.

“I’m not afraid of him, he’s nothing more than a vile servant of heartless Gods.”

“On your knees, I tell you, now!” Solma tugged hard at her daughter’s tunic.

Kyra took a final glance at the Eye-of-the-God and obeyed her mother, although she would have liked to defy that creature. For one moment she wished he would approach them, but when she saw the Executors that

impulse of senseless rebellion vanished. She knelt down slowly and kept her head bowed, in spite of the rage that was making her foam at the mouth.

She remained kneeling, looking at the ground. Her fists clenched, impotent.

“They’re leaving,” Solma said with a deep sigh.

Kyra looked at her mother and stood up.

“I’m sorry, Mother, I truly am,” she said. Her heart ached for the anxiety she had caused Solma. “It’s just too much for me. I can’t control myself, when I see… when I think…”

“I know, my child, and I respect you for it. But you must control that temper of yours…”

Suddenly the ground began to tremble. A buzzing sounded in the distance, like a furious swarm of bees. Something unusual was happening. The tremor became stronger, and Kyra saw the crows flying away. She followed them with her gaze and saw that other birds too were leaving.

“Mother!”

The two women looked around in fear, trying to find out what was happening. A strong gust of wind hit them,

“Is it a tornado?”

Solma looked up at the sky, but it was clear.

“It’s not a tornado,” she said, pointing at the sky.

“An earthquake, then?” Kyra said, trying to keep her balance in the midst of tremors which were growing more intense.

The buzz grew louder until it was deafening. Kyra covered her ears with both hands; the sound was unbearable.

And then they saw it.

In front of them.

An enormous translucent wave more than sixty feet tall, wide enough to fill the entire horizon, was coming towards them, like the leading edge of a huge tsunami. But it was not water that formed the giant wave: it was energy.

“It’s a Summoning!” cried Solma.

“Mother!”

Mother and daughter hugged each other. There was nowhere to hide. The giant wave was advancing towards them, sweeping everything in its wake, like thousands of transparent horses at full gallop.

“It’s the Gods! It’s a Summoning!” cried Solma, with the gale lashing her hair. Kyra, clinging tightly to her mother, could barely hear her in the midst of the deafening buzzing.

The giant wave which was sweeping the entire Senoca lands fell upon them. Kyra watched it in all its power and magnificence, rearing enormous before her eyes, a single instant before it reached her.

“Damned Gods!” she cried defiantly.

And the great wave of energy struck them.

Kyra was thrown backwards, hit the ground several paces away and lay there on the bare earth. She began to tremble uncontrollably, as if she had been submerged in a glacial river on a winter morning. She felt a freezing pain in her entire body.

“Mother!” she cried and reached out with her left hand to where Solma was convulsing on the ground three paces from her.

“Mother! Are you all right?!

Solma turned her head and looked at her. Her eyes opened wide. In them was a look of visceral fear.

This scared Kyra. What could have terrified her mother so much?

“The… Ring…” muttered Solma, trying to point with a trembling hand.

Kyra looked down at her Ring.

It was shining with an evil golden gleam.

And then she knew.

She had been Selected.

Unable to stop trembling, she covered her Ring with her right hand, trying to overcome the tremors.

Why me? Damn it, why me? she kept thinking, unable to make sense of the fact that she had been selected by the Gods. *Those who are summoned are seldom seen again,* she thought, feeling more and more worried. *I could escape, but they’d send the Enforcers and the Hunters after me… but I can’t let them take me, at least not without trying to escape.*

A shadow fell over her.

“What you’re thinking of trying won’t help you,” she heard a shrieking, metallic voice say. It hurt her ears.

Kyra turned her head towards the shadow and saw him.

The Eye-of-the-God.

He carried a disc in the palm of his hand. It gave out a golden gleam, like the one from her own Ring.

“What do you want?” Kyra said. There were cramps of fear in her stomach.

“Take your eyes off me and show the respect you owe me, slave,” shrieked the Enforcer of the Gods.

Three Executors surrounded her. Their huge shadows fell over her.

She looked away, then glanced back out of the corner of her eye.

“Let me be,” she said, unable to restrain herself.

The helmet of the Eye emitted a metallic sound, and the two halves of the diamond opened sideways, revealing what gave the sinister Enforcer his name: the Eye of the God.

An enormous golden iris appeared on the front of the helmet, made up of thousands of speckles surrounding a sky-blue pupil on an eternal black background. Around the great Eye she noticed thousands of tiny scattered ochre dots. It was said that whoever looked upon it never doubted they were under the scrutiny of the Gods themselves. That eye made Kyra feel uncontrollable revulsion and terror.

The Eye lit up. Issuing from it, a beam of white light swept over her twice from top to toe before it went out again.

Kyra clenched her teeth and fists hard. What was this nightmarish being doing to her?

The helmet emitted the metallic sound again, and both triangular halves closed, hiding the great Eye.

“She has been Selected. Take her away,” he ordered the Executors.

“No, leave her! You can’t take her away! She hasn’t done anything!” Solma cried desperately from the ground.

“How dare you interfere with the will of the Gods! Make the slave shut up!”

Two of the Executors turned. They hit Solma brutally until she lost consciousness.

“Nooooo! Beasts!” Kyra got to her feet. She was beside herself, her body still trembling but possessed by rage. She reached for the dagger at her belt and tried to stab the Eye-of-the-Gods in the neck.

An iron hand closed on her arm. Kyra turned her head and saw the helmet of an Executor. The opening between the two sections of the helmet lit up, and Kyra saw red, bloodshot eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” said a voice so deep it seemed to be coming from an underground cavern.

Kyra shook off the intimidation and tried to free her arm. A second Executor hit her with his spear in the stomach, leaving her breathless. Kyra bent over as they disarmed her. She was left slumped on her knees.

She looked at her mother, who was lying unconscious and injured. Rage and frustration burned inside her.

“It’s time for you to fulfill your destiny,” said the Eye-of-the-Gods, and placed the disc on her forehead.

Night bore her away.

3

“No! No! No!” Ikai cried, shaking his head violently, then he woke up.

He opened his eyes in bewilderment, perspiration on his brow and his hair soaking wet. He stared at the rustic mud wall, trying to clear his mind. He did not know where he was or what had happened, but he felt as though a giant hand were squeezing his chest. Could he be waking from a nightmare? Or was he still deep in one? He tried to raise himself in the cot, and a terrible pain seared the whole of his side as far as his chest. He gave a howl while his mind tried to bear the suffering. He lay back on the rough canvas, he hurt so much he could hardly think.

“Stay still, don’t move,” a familiar voice said.

“What happened?” Ikai asked, dazed, looking for the origin of the voice.

“Don’t move, or the stitches will burst and the wounds will open. They’re not scarred over yet.”

Ikai managed to locate the man who had spoken from the entrance of the hut. He recognized Master Hunter Sejof.

“Where are we, Master?”

“Easy, boy, you’re badly wounded.”

Ikai looked down at the bandages which covered his chest almost entirely. They were greenish and smelt awful. He had to turn his head, feeling sick.

“We’re in Fisma; it was the nearest village with a trustworthy healer. You were losing blood, and we had to bring you here urgently. To be honest, I didn’t think you’d make it. I’ve seen many wounds but what this bear did to you… you don’t survive something like that…”

“How long?”

“You’ve been here midway between life and death for four weeks.”

“That long?”

“You can thank the Moon god that you survived.”

An old woman wearing a plain grey woolen tunic came into the hut, carrying a clay bowl.

“This is Isam, the healer. She’s saved you. Don’t ask me how, because I really can’t understand it. You ought to be dead…”

The woman’s face was full of wrinkles. From among them there appeared a mischievous smile.

“The boy deserves the credit. I’ve only taken care of the wounds so they wouldn’t get infected, but if he’s survived it’s because of his own spirit. There’s a lot of strength inside him.”

“Oh, you’ve done something more than that…” Sejof said, crossing his arms over his chest with a smile.

The old woman came close to Ikai and offered him the bowl.

“Finish it all. It tastes horrible, I admit, but it’ll help your body get back some vitality.”

“Thanks…” Ikai said, looking into the old woman’s eyes, where he found the light of wisdom which years and a life of study bring. He swallowed with difficulty, for his throat was as parched as a desert. He gagged at the taste, but drank it to the bitter end.

“I’ve done all I could,” the healer said, turning to Sejof. “You know your coin is always welcome in this house, and the protection of the powerful Hunters is a blessing for this poor old woman,” she finished with another smile.

“Your services are always excellent, my old friend, but this time I must say you’ve outdone yourself,” Sejof replied with a wink.

The healer took the bowl and put her hand on Ikai’s forehead. Then she opened his left eye and examined it carefully.

“You’ve got no fever left now, the infection has gone. The poultices have done their work. You’re not to take the bandages off for one week, do you understand me, young Hunter?”

“But they smell rotten…”

“And they’ll smell even worse, but they avoid infection and help the flesh form a scar.”

Ikai nodded.

“I won’t touch them.”

“Good. And now, if the great Hunters will excuse me, I have more sick people to attend to.” The old woman went to a shelf of elm-wood and picked up a pottery container, covered with linen and tied with strips of leather. Ikai wondered what was in it. Then he saw the other jars and the human skull on the shelf and thought he would rather not know.

“Th… thank you,” he said, and bowed.

The healer turned. “Remember me, young Hunter, remember Isam the healer.”

“I’ll remember you, Isam the healer.”

The old woman nodded at him, and left the hut.

“She’s odd, a bit eccentric, but the best healer I know. Not even the best surgeons and apothecaries of the great city with all their medicines and knowledge taken from the Enforcers of the Gods are as good when it comes to healing serious wounds.”

“I remember now… the beast…”

“That’s right, boy, you almost didn’t make it. That monster of a bear nearly minced you up.”

“Bear…?”

“It had the head and fur of a bear, but I couldn’t see it very well. The beast had its back to us.”

“It might have looked like a bear, but it was really something else… a strange beast…”

Sejof put his hand on his chin.

“It’s true that out there, beyond the limit of what the Gods allow, strange animals roam… it’s not the first time we’ve seen them.”

Ikai nodded.

“It wasn’t a bear… not as we know them on this side… it was some kind of freak, Master. I can assure you…”

Sejof sighed deeply.

“It could have been, Ikai, I don’t know. What I do know is that it killed four of your fellow Hunters and almost killed you. And they were all experienced men. That wasn’t the work of a mountain bear… I can assure you of that.”

Ikai tried to raise himself again, very slowly, aching all over, until he managed to sit up on the cot.

“And the carnage in the gully…”

Sejof nodded, looking worried, which was unusual in him.

“There’s no point going over this business any more. Whatever lies beyond the Boundary mustn’t be disturbed. Unfortunately, this time we came across something we shouldn’t have and we paid dearly for it, very dearly…” he said, shaking his head as he looked out of the small window.

Ismes and Yestas came into the hut. They were armed and carried their hunting bags.

“The sloth’s woken up at last!” Ismes joked, and came up to the cot to greet Ikai.

Ikai smiled at his friend and acknowledged the gesture.

Yestas laughed and saluted with an elaborate bow.

“Has the great hunter had a good enough rest?” he said teasingly.

Ikai pretended to yawn.

“I think I’ll rest another three or four weeks.”

The three of them laughed, and even Sejof smiled, something he rarely did.

“We’re really glad you feel better,” Ismes told him. “We brought you at a stiff march, and it was pure luck you didn’t die on us before we reached the village.”

“I owe you my life, I won’t forget,” Ikai said, looking into the eyes of both his friends.

“You would have done the same for us,” replied Yestas.

Ikai nodded. “Without a moment’s thought. Hunter Brothers we are”

Sejof interrupted them. “It’s time to leave. I have to go back to the capital. The Regent wants an explanation of what happened. He’s sent his damned Proxy and he’s been pestering me for days. If I don’t go back right now I fear our necks may be in danger. The Regent is a man of very limited patience, and all too eager when it comes to shedding blood,” he added in a barely audible whisper.

Ikai nodded. “I understand. Be on your way, don’t worry about me. I’m all right.”

“I need to get the latest news about what’s going on in the capital and find more recruits to train.” A shadow passed across the Master Hunter’s face. “We’ve lost a third of the hunting party.” He shook his head and

glanced toward the door. “Luckily we haven’t been called during these weeks, but I have a feeling we will be soon.”

Ikai finished saying goodbye to his companions and watched them leave. He would miss them; they were like family for him, brothers. The Hunters formed a pack of wolves, with the Master the alpha male.

Sejof stopped at the door and turned to Ikai.

“Before you join me again, you’d better go to your farm.”

Ikai tensed at once. “Has anything bad happened? Is it my mother? My sister?”

“I don’t know, Ikai, but I’ve heard rumors… you’d better go and see for yourself what’s up. If any Proxy should question you, you’re free of service until your wounds heal.”

“I appreciate that, Master,” Ikai said, bowing his head as an expression of the respect he felt.

“One last warning: keep away from the Eyes-of-the-Gods. The orders of the Gods and their servants must be fulfilled to the letter, or you’ll pay with your life and that of your family. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, master. I won’t confront them. I’ll comply with whatever they ask.”

Sejof nodded.

“I’ve left you your pay and an advance on that basket, under a new set of armor. Your old one was useless after that. Good luck, Ikai!”

A few days later, leaning on an elm staff he had fashioned for himself, Ikai came to familiar lands. The bow and quiver he carried on his back pulled on the still fresh wounds with every step, his whole body hurt, but he could not discard them; they were part of his equipment as a Hunter, and all he possessed. From a low hilltop he looked out at the endless plain which stretched as far as the tributaries of the great river Zibai, divided into countless rectangles of tilled soil, each one with a tiny building, as humble as the people who dwelt in them. The fields of his county. He was home at last. He went down by the old road to Issoli, his village, but decided to go

around it to the farm, since he had no desire to meet the Proxy and have to explain things.

When he reached his family's fields, Ikai could make out the small farmhouse where he had lived all his life. He noticed that the vegetable garden was unkempt and weeds grew everywhere among the sparse winter greenery. Some of the vegetables were even rotting. That alarmed him. His mother would never allow good food to go bad, never.

Something's not right, he thought, and hurried to the door. Through the two small windows with the worn cloth which served for curtains he could see no light, even though it was almost dark by now.

Ikai opened the door hurriedly and called to the reigning darkness:

"Mother! Kyra!"

There was no answer.

"Mother! Kyra!" he called again anxiously. He dropped the bow and his bag by the door and rushed to the back rooms, with a sense of something ominous eating at his stomach.

He found no one. The house was deserted. He went through the kitchen and his room in search of anything that might indicate what could have happened, but found no answers. He went out and called again, feeling more and more worried:

"Mother! Kyra! Where are you?"

The silent breath of the wind was his only reply. He ran to the back of the house, to the oak tree, Kyra's favorite spot, but she was not there either. Acid worry crept up his throat. Where were they? It was getting dark. They should be home by now, and the fire lit.

Suddenly he heard a voice. "Ikai? Is that you?"

Ikai traced the voice to its source and saw a boy in the shadows by the fence.

"Yes, it's me, Ikai," he replied, and walked towards the boy.

"Thanks to Girlai, our Father Moon, it's you. I thought it might be some thief… come quickly."

Ikai went up to the boy.

"Volte, I didn't recognize you," he said to the youngest of the Arkens, their neighbors. "What do you know about my mother and sister? Where are they?"

“You’d better come with me, Ikai. Come quickly, to my house,” the boy said, looking around warily.

Ikai followed him, and they hurried to the Arkens’ house. In pain, he tried hard to keep up with the boy’s quick steps.

They reached the farmhouse, very similar to their own, if a little bigger and with a small stable at the back. They went in quickly. Inside the shared living-room by the fire were Telmas, Volte’s older brother, and their father Colem. Both men eyed them fearfully, but when they recognized the boys they relaxed.

“Ikai… welcome,” said Colem, the patriarch.

Ikai returned the greeting warmly. He looked at him directly and asked:

“My mother, my sister?”

Colem nodded and motioned him to follow. The man went to the back room. He opened the door and they went in. Solma was lying on the bed. With her was Colem’s wife Ulma, tending to her.

“She was injured,” Colem began to explain.

Ikai rushed to hug his mother, who recognized him with eyes filled with tears.

“Ikai, my son.”

“Mother, what happened? Are you badly hurt?”

Solma began to cry, and Ikai noticed the marks on her face and neck. She was very much battered, with ugly bruises. He knelt beside her and examined her gently.

“She got a heavy beating, her whole body is like that…” Ulma said sadly, moving aside to leave him more space. “We did all we could, but she’s still very weak. She’s been like this for weeks, without the strength to get up.”

“Who did this to her?” Ikai asked furiously.

“The Executors…” Colem said. There was fear in his voice.

“Executors? Here?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand.”

Ulma looked at Colem and for a moment there was a deadly silence.

“They’ve taken her,” muttered Solma amid sobs, “they’ve taken my baby,” and she burst into tears.

Ikai’s stomach gave such a lurch that he thought it would come up through his mouth.

Ulma put her hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear:

“Your sister was Selected.”

Ikai looked into her eyes. Trying to calm the wild sea of rage and frustration within him, he listened to her. Ulma told him in detail all that had happened during the Summoning.

Ikai’s heart began to beat like a galloping horse.

“The Eye-of-the-God took her. Your brave mother tried to stop it and the Executors gave her a beating. I don’t know how she survived, we thought she must be dead. But every day she would say the same thing over and over: ‘Ikai will come back, he’ll find her.’ She’s been waiting for you day after day, refusing to die.”

Ikai looked at his mother’s sweet face, and his eyes filled with tears. He wanted to kill those monsters and tear out their hearts with his own hands, but he knew that confronting an Executor meant death. The rage and impotence he felt were so strong he thought white foam would come out of his mouth. He breathed deeply, trying to calm down, trying to think. He decided to calm down and think.

A few moments went by with all eyes fixed on him. At last he got up.

“First of all,” he said with deep feeling, “I want to thank you for taking such good care of my mother. You’ve saved her life.”

“She would’ve done the same for us, we know her well, a whole life struggling side by side to survive in these harsh and ungrateful days,” Ulma said, smiling at Solma and stroking her forehead tenderly. “Your mother helped me bring these two boys into this sad world. I could never let her die.”

“It’s worthy of you,” Ikai said, lowering his head, overcome with emotion. “I know very well you have barely enough to put in your stomachs, and even so you’ve shared it with her. I don’t have enough words to express how grateful I am. But I do have something you need: coin, and with it I’ll try to compensate you for all you’ve done, although you deserve far more than I have for all your kindness and friendship.”

“It’s not necessary…” Colem began.

“You’re a proud man, Colem, and that’s good,” Ikai interrupted him, “but pride doesn’t fill empty stomachs.” He took his bag with his pay and tossed a coin to Volte, who was watching from the door.

“Go find the healer of Issoli. Give her this coin and tell her there are more. And get her to hurry.”

Volte nodded and ran out.

“The rest is for your family, Colem,” Ikai said, and gave him the pouch of coins.

Colem looked at Ulma, who nodded.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to speak to my mother alone.”

“Of course, Ikai,” Colem said. He and his wife left the room, closing the door behind them.

Ikai knelt by his mother and held her hands tenderly.

“Mother…” he said, trying to hold back his tears.

“They’ve taken her away, Ikai, they’ve taken your sister away,” she said between sobs.

“You have to rest and get better, Mother. You have to get your strength back and get well again.”

“Listen to me carefully, son, you must go in search of your sister, you must find her and bring her back.”

Ikai sighed. What her mother wanted was impossible, and he knew it. Once the Gods took someone, that person was never seen again. Those who had tried what his mother was asking him to do ended up dead. Death came at the hands of the Regent and his Proxies, or at the hands of the Enforcers of the Gods.

“Mother…”

“Ikai, it’s your duty, you must save your sister. It’s your responsibility!”

Ikai looked into his mother’s eyes. In them he saw the strength and determination of that incomparable woman: qualities he wished for himself. But he could not stay there and let his sister suffer the evil destiny which undoubtedly awaited her at the hands of the Gods. He did not even want to imagine what they might do to her. No, he would not allow it, he would go

to her rescue. She was his little sister and there was nothing on the face of the earth that he loved more.

“Family comes first, Ikai!”

“I know, Mother, you’ve taught me that.”

“It’s always been that way, and so it will always be. Your blood is the most important thing, the thing you must fight for with all your heart, the thing that makes this insufferable existence worth living. Without your blood, without your family, you’re nothing. A speck of dust the wind will blow away, nothing more.”

Ikai nodded. He understood perfectly; his mother had taught him this since he was a little boy, even more so after they had taken his father away.

“Ikai, give me your word, swear you won’t rest until you find her and bring her back. We can’t lose her the way we lost your father.”

Ikai nodded. “I promise you, Mother.”

“Don’t rest until you’ve brought her back. Do whatever you have to.”

“I will, Mother, I give you my word.”

“Talk to Proxy Ambuk, beg him to intercede.”

Ikai nodded, although he knew well that no Proxy would move a finger for them, risking his precious skin before the ire of the Enforcers of the Gods.

“I’ll leave at dawn.”

Solma smiled at her son, and all the tension dissolved from her face. She relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

Ikai looked at her with his heart full of pride. She was a true fighter; she would survive. He looked out of the little window over the bed and saw the stars shining brightly. The coming day would bring good weather: The day when he would set off in search of Kyra.

He stared at the Ring on his arm and nodded.

I’m coming for you, little sister, I won’t abandon you. Not ever. Hold fast, I’m coming for you. Be strong and survive.

4

Complete darkness enveloped her. Kyra tried to make out anything around her that would allow her to know where she was, but she could see nothing. There was no source of light. She touched the floor she was lying on; cold and damp crept up her arm, a shiver ran all the way up to the nape of her neck. She tried to penetrate the blackness which imprisoned her, but to no avail. A feeling of helplessness and anxiety came over her.

Where am I? What happened?

She crawled around looking for a way out, a light, anything which would allow her to tell where she was. But she hit her head against a wall. The pain made her remember, and disconnected blurred images surged up in her mind as if she were waking up from a nightmare. She remembered the Summoning, the Eye-of-the-God and what had happened. She realized she was shivering, and it was not just from the cold.

Suddenly she heard a muffled sound to her right, quite close. Her heart skipped a beat. She turned her head, trying to identify the origin of the sound. She could not tell whether it was human or animal, but hoped with all her heart it was the former. Again she tried to probe the darkness… nothing. It was impossible to see a thing.

The sound turned into a moan... definitely human. Kyra took a deep breath and let out a long sigh, getting rid of some of the fear which had its hold on her. She recovered some of her courage. If it was not a wild beast she could defend herself; her brother had taught her how.

“Who’s there?” she asked firmly, surprised that her voice sounded so self-assured. The moaning stopped, and there was a moment of tense silence. Kyra clenched her fists and supported herself on one knee, waiting, ready to strike.

“You’d better speak, or else you’ll be sorry.”

“No, please… my name is Yosane…” a frightened female voice said.

“If you try anything I swear you’ll regret it,” Kyra said forcefully.

A sob was the only reply to her threat. “Please… don’t hurt me…” Yosane said, and started to cry.

When she heard the sobs, Kyra relaxed and let down her guard. “My name is Kyra, don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you.”

“Where are we? I… I don’t remember what happened,” Yosane said, with anxiety.

“I don’t know… it must be some sort of dungeon… What’s the last thing you remember?”

“The Summoning, the Executors… and… and… the Eye-of-the-God. Then nothing… I think I woke up here…”

“That’s what I remember too.”

“Then you’ve been chosen as well?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Kyra felt rage begin to stir up the acid in her stomach.

“Then we’re both in the same boat…”

“The same misfortune,” Kyra said, wrinkling her nose. “Try and come closer to me, I’m up against a wall.”

“I can’t see a thing…”

“Don’t fret, follow my voice.”

“All right,” Yosane said a little more firmly, and began to crawl across the floor.

Kyra stretched out her hand in the dark.

“Don’t be afraid, come towards my voice.”

“I’m trying to.”

Kyra guided her hand towards the sound of Yosane’s body dragging on the floor, and soon she found her.

“This way,” she said, touching the girl’s head.

The two girls met. For a moment distrust and fear overcame them and they remained silent, each fearing some threat from the other. But after the initial moment of uncertainty they came closer in the dark. They snuggled against each other, pressed back against the wall. The silence became heavier, a silence of sadness, distress and forewarning. Despair engulfed them, and they hugged close in the gloomy darkness.

They did not move for hours, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. Discouragement and uncertainty grew with the passing of time; they seemed to be floating in the air they breathed, like a ghost of dark wings waiting for the right moment to bear them to the underworld.

Yosane gave a broken sigh. “Why us…?”

“Who knows… the Golden Gods are whimsical and pitiless…” Kyra replied with a shrug. “They’re used to summoning whoever they please, for reasons only they know.”

“But they usually summon men…”

“Sure, to send them to forced labor.”

“This was different…”

“Why do you think so?”

Yosane breathed in deeply.

“I was in the great square of the capital, Osaen, when the Summoning came. I saw the giant Sacred Monolith of the Gods shimmering at the top of the square. The four sides of the polished black surface began to shine and I got scared, very scared. Then the humming began and the tremors, for a moment there I thought the monolith was going to collapse, that the whole hundred and twenty feet would fall on the crowd, crushing hundreds of people. But luckily it didn’t. First there was this blinding flash and then a deafening boom, and that produced the giant wave of energy of the Summoning. It spread out in all directions, like the ripples a pebble makes in the water of a lake.”

“So the Summoning was generated by this giant monolith?”

“Yes, it was the monolith, I swear, I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Go on, what happened next?”

“It swept through the whole square, the whole city, and it hit me so hard it threw me backwards on to the ground. Then the Eyes-of-the-Gods arrived with their Executors. There were hundreds of people in the square, all of them lying helpless on the ground. For a long time they were searching among the people and finally they reached me. My Ring was shining brightly…”

“Yes, mine too. Did you see whether anyone else’s was shining as well?”

“No, only mine. When I saw it shining brightly like that I was scared and looked around, but mine was the only one… Then this being arrived… the Eye-of-the-God, the front of his helmet split in two and I saw the Eye appear, I nearly fainted with fear… then everything went black.”

“It’s not the first time that women have been called.” Kyra said. “But why us I have no idea.”

“We must have something different. They’ve chosen us for something, for some specific purpose, this isn’t by chance. Just think, out of all the people in that square I was the only one selected, and there were lots of other people there… Why didn’t they summon other women?”

Kyra pondered on that for a moment. She had not thought about it, in fact it had not even occurred to her. “You like to think about things, don’t you? Now you’ve made me wonder… Perhaps you’re right, but that doesn’t change our situation.”

“But, why do you think we’re here?” Yosane asked, sounding more curious now.

“I don’t know why we’re here, but I fear it’s not for anything good…”

“Yes… I suspect that too. If they’d chosen all the girls in that square, I would’ve guessed it was to do forced labor or service. But if they only chose a few… that means there’s some very specific reason behind it. We’ve been chosen among so many for something specific, and it’s because of something we have in common.”

“You certainly like to think,” Kyra said with a giggle, surprised by her companion’s intelligence.

“Sorry, I can’t help it. I’m always going over things in my mind.”

“That’s a good quality, in my opinion. And one I don’t have myself…” Kyra said with a cheerful laugh. “I’m more about acting on impulse, or at least that’s what my brother Ikai says. To be honest, I have quite a temper, and sometimes it gets me into trouble.”

“I’m pretty much the opposite… very quiet, prone to thinking things over a good deal before I do anything. It’s very hard for me to make up my mind to act. I hardly ever do… I’m quite shy… and I scare easily…”

“Well, then we’re a good pair of opposites, the two of us. This goes against your theory that we’ve been chosen for something we have in common.”

“Maybe… or maybe what we share is not a character trait, but something else.”

“You’ve lost me, Yosane,” Kyra said, and gave her a friendly shove with her shoulder. “I think you’d better keep searching, and I’ll take care of defending us.”

“What do you think they’ll do to us?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid.”

“They wouldn’t… abuse us, would they?” Yosane asked, fear showing clearly in her voice.

“You’d better be prepared for the worst. But if anybody dares lay their hand on me, they’ll regret it. And if they try the same on you, I’ll defend you. My brother taught me to fight, and I will.”

“I’ve heard rumors in the capital… when they take pretty girls away they’re never seen again… they talk of sex-slaves… and worse…”

“I don’t know what’s in store for us, and that might be our fate, but I’m not staying around to find out.”

Kyra had also heard those rumors, and others that spoke of sacrifices of maids to the Gods. Unfortunately, there’s no smoke without fire… so she decided to act. She stood up and began to feel the wall.

“Let’s look for a way out,” she said to her companion.

For an entire day they tried to find some crack to escape through. The dungeon had neither doors or windows, but was of solid rock, and to her surprise it was spherical. They had felt every inch of the room in search of a possible way out, and Yosane had marked the exact dimensions of the dungeon on the wall with a piece of stone. But they had not succeeded in finding a possible exit.

Kyra could not explain how they had been put in there, but there did not seem to be any opening. At one end they found a kind of drinking trough made of stone, with water in it. Beside it, in another stone trough, they found dried meat and black bread. Yosane had suggested rationing the food and water so that they could hold out for as many days as possible. She had to admit she would never have thought of that herself; she would have eaten all the food to keep up her strength in case she needed to face danger. A little further right there was a bronze bowl with a heavy lid, which they used as a latrine.

For some reason their captors kept them alive, albeit totally isolated. By the third day they were as blind as moles in that enclosed darkness. Discouragement wore away Kyra's spirit, and the relentless blackness weighed on her heart like lead. They had been abandoned to their fate in that strange, cold, gloomy chamber.

Two more days passed, and discouragement gnawed at what remained of her fighting soul. Kyra tried to shake off that feeling of defeatism. Their situation might be disheartening, but whatever happened she had to survive, and survive she would. She would fight to her last breath, she would not let herself be beaten by the Enforcers of the Gods even if they kept her locked up there for the rest of her days. Only one thing cheered her up: chatting with the bright Yosane, who seemed to have an answer for almost any question.

"Tell me, Yosane, where are you from? What's your job? Something tells me you're not a plain peasant girl from the Sixth County like me."

"There's nothing wrong about being a peasant… you shouldn't be ashamed of it, we all produce for the Gods, one way or another."

"Some ways are more dignified than others, and some lives are more comfortable …"

"You're right here… I won't argue with that."

"Give me your hand."

Yosane stretched out her arm, and Kyra ran her fingers over the engraving on her Ring.

"The Fox. You're a Craftswoman."

"That's right."

"What kind? Your hands are soft, you're not a smith or carpenter. No, you don't work with your hands but your head, am I right?"

"Yes, you're right. I'm a Builder. Like my father and my grandfather and their father and grandfather too before them. We build for the Regent in the capital."

Kyra grunted under her breath.

"I was starting to like you, till now… if your family builds for the Regent in the capital, his family and yours must be related. It's an important job, and Sesmok only assigns important jobs to his kinsfolk."

Alarmed, Yosane hurried to deny this. “No, honestly, it’s not like that at all. My family has a good reputation, our buildings speak for themselves. We’ve been working in the Second and Third Counties for generations. One day my father was called to the capital, by the Proxy Jaisme, one of the Regent’s cousins, who’d been told good things about my family’s work. He interviewed my father, and since then we’ve been working in Osaen for Sesmok. At the moment my father’s building a new extension to the east wing of the Regent’s palace.”

“I see…” Kyra said quietly, and Yosane’s relieved sigh reached her ears.

“So you know how to read and write, not like me. Because I’m a peasant I’m condemned to be illiterate and half-witted.”

“Yes, I know how to read and write, plus some other more advanced concepts, like geometry. In construction you need to understand a lot of mathematical concepts so that the buildings aren’t just beautiful, they don’t fall down under their own weight or as a result of a storm.”

“And do you like it?”

“All my life, ever since I was a little girl, I’ve lived among manuscripts, drawings and calculations, listening to my father and his colleagues argue about a thousand and one theories. I have to admit I love it as much as my father Sistas does. He’s a man to be respected, with exceptional intelligence and knowledge. There’s nothing I’d like more than to go on learning the trade, design new buildings like you’ve never seen before, buildings to put the Regent’s palace to shame. But there’s another area which appeals to me even more: building great riverboats. It fascinates me. I’d love to be able to design and build great cargo barges that would sail up and down the river Zibai. I’ve been studying the subject a lot with a friend of my father’s, and it honestly has me in its spell. Do you know it’s possible to carry enormous blocks of granite in giant barges that won’t sink under the weight of the cargo? It’s amazing! Simply amazing!”

“Oh, I can see you love your profession,” Kyra said with a laugh. “Me, on the other hand, I hate anything to do with working the fields from sunrise to sunset. There’s nothing I hate more. Well, yes there is, the Enforcers of the Gods. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“No, I’m an only child. I live with my father and my mother Alea, in the Crafts quarter in Osaen.”

“I’d never met anybody who was educated before. Well educated, I mean. There’s a smith in our village, but his knowledge isn’t very advanced — in fact he can barely read. In the Sixth County we’re almost all farmers, there’s only one small town: Tisota, the capital, and the rest are just small villages devoted to farming. And we’re a long way away from Osaen. Is it true what they say about the Sacred Monolith? They say it was erected by the Gods themselves, using their Power.”

“There are theories about that, and two are the commonest. Nobody knows which of them is true, but if you like I’ll tell you which one I think is the most likely.”

“Yes, please, do.”

“A thousand years ago the great monolith was put up where it is today. The monolith itself contains Power, and it’s made of a material we know nothing about. That means it’s not the work of men, or the Enforcers, because they don’t have the Gods’ Power either. It was built by the Golden Ones themselves. I have no doubt about that. As to who raised it and put it where it now stands, there are two schools of thought. One says it was the Gods themselves, using their immense Power, who came down from their Eternal City and raised the monolith. The other says it was their Enforcers, using thousands of slaves, who raised it. My father and I both think it was the second one.”

“Did they know how to do that a thousand years ago?”

“If they didn’t know how, the Gods transmitted the knowledge through the Eyes-of-the-Gods. It’s happened with other materials, like steel. Copper wasn’t strong enough for the Gods’ needs, but that was all we knew. The Gods taught us to make steel, to forge it, not out of the goodness of their hearts but because they needed it for their great city. Before the arrival of the Gods we were a people with a very rudimentary technology, very primitive. We knew the wheel, copper, pottery, simple adobe houses and the building of small fishing boats and seafaring vessels with just one sail. During these thousand years of slavery, the Gods have been giving us more and more morsels of technology which we’ve used to produce goods and build cities. The Gods don’t only enjoy a Power capable of destroying everything on the ground, their technology is very advanced.”

“I’m well aware that everything they do is for their own good. Just as I know that anyone who can’t produce what they want is executed.”

“What do you think it’s for?”

“The great Monolith?”

“Yes, I often wonder, apart from the Summoning, of course.”

“That’s another interesting question… there are a great many theories which we have no way of checking. In my humble opinion I think it’s a tool of the Gods with something of their Power in it, and I’m not sure how, but I believe it’s connected with the Boundary.”

The two girls chatted a while in the darkness. Hours went by and sleep overcame them.

On the sixth day of their imprisonment, once she had eaten her day’s ratio Kyra felt melancholic. She began to think about her mother, wondering how she might be faring — she had left her badly wounded, and without Ikai to help her she feared the worst. To get rid of the anxiety in her chest, she began to sing one of the songs they always hummed while they worked the fields. It was an ancient song which Solma had taught her, and which she in turn had learnt from her mother.

Yosane came closer and listened until Kyra finished the song.

“That’s a beautiful song, full of tradition.”

“Thank you. It’s about Oxatsi, Mother Sea and how she misses the Senoca, her people, who were taken from her one day and who she’s waiting for with open arms. My grandmother used to say it’s as ancient as the time we’ve been imprisoned within the Boundary. It’s a song of hope for our people, who once lived by the sea and off the sea, and now can only dream of being able to do so again.”

“I love the tradition of our people, the myths and legends about Oxatsi, about what our nation was before it was enslaved by the Gods, about how we lived off the sea and for the sea. I think in part, that’s why I’m fascinated by ships. It’s hard to believe that once we were a nation of fishermen who sailed the endless ocean, exploring new and distant lands in fragile vessels with just a single sail.”

“Do you follow the ancient traditions?”

“Do you mean the old beliefs or the tattoos?”

“Both.”

“I still believe in our heritage as a people, I don’t believe the falsehoods the High Priest Torkem and his clergymen try to get us to

believe," Yosane said in a very low voice, as if she were afraid they might overhear her. "As for the tattoos… I know it's traditional, that the point of them is to remind us of who we were, the things we knew… so they don't fade from our people's memory as time goes by. I know it's very laudable, brave even, as it doesn't please the Regent and his kind… but I'm terrified of having one done."

"Terrified?"

"Of the pain…"

Kyra laughed, holding her stomach. "I honestly don't know how someone as learned and intelligent as you can be so scared and fearful. A kick in the shin is more painful!"

"I know, I know, don't tease me. I know I'm a coward for not following our people's tradition, for not passing on our cultural heritage to the next generations on my own skin, but my fear's too strong and I just can't. I want to but I don't dare. And there's nothing I'd like more than to overcome this fear that paralyzes me, I just freeze and go to pieces at the thought…"

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

Yosane sighed deeply. "I guess you must have a tattoo of some sort…"

"Yes, on my right leg I have a stingray flying out of the sea towards the sun. When I see the damned Ring on my left arm, I look at the stingray leaping free and it gives me hope, it cheers me up. Besides, they say certain varieties of stingrays do really sting their enemies, like lightning in a storm. They seem wonderful to me. Can you imagine being able to do that to an Enforcer? I'd give anything to …"

"Kyra…" Yosane warned her in a low voice, "you shouldn't say those things, they're punishable with death… and in any case only the Gods can do things like that through their Power."

Kyra remained silent. She knew Yosane was right. She remembered the fateful incident, what had happened and how the Enforcers had taken her father… Because of her own fault… Now she had to live with that weight forever, for the rest of her life. And it was a tormenting weight which oppressed her heart and brought tears of sorrow and rage to her eyes. She held her tears and passed her arm across her eyes.

"You're right, it's just that I hate them bitterly," she said in a whisper. "They took my father…"

“I’m so sorry, Kyra…”

“Thank you… it was because of me… it’s something I have to live with.”

“Don’t torment yourself. If they took him, it’s not your fault. Be clear on that. It’s them who enslave us, it’s them who take away our loved ones. Don’t torment yourself.”

“Thank you…”

“Keep your hopes up, he must be alive somewhere, working in the quarries or in the Eternal City where the Gods live. Always think that he’s alive, don’t let despair get the better of you. You’re strong, you have a fighting spirit, don’t give up, you’ll see him again someday.”

Yosane’s words calmed the anguish Kyra was feeling.

“You’re a good person, Yosane. I think we’re going to be good friends.”

“I certainly hope so,” she replied with a laugh.

The two girls hugged in the dark and a strong link was forged between them, one born of fear and need, one of unbreakable friendship.

Suddenly there came a metallic sound above their heads.

They gave a start and stood up at once. This was something new.

Kyra closed her fists and clenched her teeth.

“They’re coming, get ready. Time to fight.”

5

It was midmorning, and Ikai was limping along the narrow streets of his village. The wounds in his side punished him mercilessly every time he made a prolonged effort or sudden movement, but the pangs of acute pain were not going to dissuade him; he would bear the suffering. He knew what he had to do, and he was aware of the great risk he was about to face. He had been thinking about it all night and along the whole length of the dusty road from the farm, weighing up the possible outcomes of what he was about to do, as he always did before an important decision. Before any decision, since Ikai was anything but impulsive and rarely let himself be carried away in the heat of the moment. As his sister used to say*: It's as if you didn't have blood in your veins.* But for the first time in a long time, after analyzing the situation carefully and coming to a logical conclusion, he was not going to follow what his mind told him to do. He was preparing to go against what he knew was the most sensible course of action.

He had to save his sister. At any cost. Even at that of his own life. He had promised his mother, and he would be true to his word. And although he was well aware that his mission was little short of impossible and that he would most likely die in the attempt, he could not avoid facing it, because it was all about his little sister and whether or not he had made a promise to his mother, Ikai would not rest until he had her back. He walked determinedly, looking straight ahead, with a single thought in his mind: saving Kyra.

The villagers backed away when he passed. They all knew him, his family, his farm. He had grown up in that community and had spent his time in the village since he was a young boy. His family was well-respected, but Ikai had been feared and hated since the day when he had accepted the profession he now followed. He was a Hunter, and his end was to serve the Regent and the Gods by hunting men for them. Ikai justified this to his unforgiving conscience by shielding himself behind the idea that he hunted criminals and fugitives, but he knew at first hand this was not always the case. Very often it was some wretched peasant who had tried to

escape from a cruel end marked out by the Gods. That was what had happened to his sister. If Kyra fled, they would send a party of Hunters after her. The mere thought made his stomach turn. He felt a terrible shame at being who he was, and it crushed him as if a whole mountain had fallen on his shoulders.

He arrived at the village square and his head cleared. He gazed at the fountain on one side, beside the drinking trough. As was the tradition with his people, most of the façades were painted in indigo blue, while the roofs were chalk white, giving the impression that the landscape was a sea of houses. *We are the People of the Sea, and although the Gods have denied it to us, we remember in our own way so future generations will not forget.*

Ikai had always been amazed by his people's surprising capacity to cling to the hope of old times, of better times, when they were free and lived off the sea. Now they lived in the extreme poverty of slavery, but even so all the houses sported spotless blue façades, while the dark and cheerless truth of an oppressed people hid inside the humble abodes. He stared at that sea of stone against a sky filled with white clouds which was the village and smiled. *We're the Senoca, the People of the Sea, and so we'll always be.*

Something caught his attention out of the corner of his right eye. On the wall of the smithy was a red spot, as of blood. Puzzled, he came closer to the wall. When he looked more closely he found it was not blood but a hand painted in red. Someone had smeared his hand with red paint and then pressed it against the wall so as to leave a print. Ikai breathed out heavily. He had seen that mark before in several villages in other counties, but never in his own. He did not know what it meant, but he felt a chill.

He went on towards the square. He recognized the Proxy's house immediately. It was a huge tower which filled the whole of the north side of the square. It was robustly built, much bigger than the rest of the buildings of the village. He walked up to the reinforced door of the building, which was flanked by two guards, a man and a woman, both in leather armor and carrying spear and shield. When they saw him approach they called on him to halt. He watched them; they were nervous, distrustfully checking the weapons he carried. He stopped in front of them and showed them the golden Ring. The guards recognized the symbol of the eagle and solemnly saluted him.

"Greetings, Hunter," the woman said.

“Greetings, Guard,” replied Ikai politely. He recognized her; she had spent some time stationed in the village and by the expression on her face she had recognized him as well. In any case, in the pyramid of power of the kingdom the Hunters ranked above guards and soldiers of the Regent, which meant that they would be respectful and helpful.

“Do you wish to see the Proxy?” asked the other, a man with a thick black beard whom Ikai did not know.

Ikai nodded.

“Today isn’t a day for admitting the people, Proxy Ambuk isn’t accepting anybody… but you being a Hunter… It’s all right, wait here, I’ll see whether our lord will be prepared to receive you,” the woman said, and disappeared into the building.

Ambuk was enjoying the cool fresh air, wrapped in his woolen cloak. The garden behind the house was open, and only a tall hedge protected him from the winter wind. But this garden, once filled with flowers, color and life, had been the favorite place of his beloved wife Olga, and Ambuk tried, with little success, to preserve it. He knelt before the two graves and laid some wild flowers on them which he had picked from the field which opened out to the east.

“I do what I can, but you know I’ve never been much good at this,” he said, addressing his wife’s grave. “I know it looks dreadful at the moment, but come spring I’ll try to make it blossom again and fill it with color and life. I have a new servant, from the south, and he seems to know quite a lot about flowers and their care. Yes, this year we might have a garden worthy of the name.”

A gust of wind ruffled his white hair, and Ambuk rearranged it as best he could. He put his hand on the second grave and tears came to his eyes.

“Take good care of your mother, Matis, my son, wherever you may be. Don’t let anything bad happen to her. Take care of her always. I know you will.”

He dried his tears with the sleeve of his silk tunic and stood up. He took a deep breath, trying to quell the great sorrow he felt. Several years had gone by since that fateful day, but for Ambuk it was as if it had

happened that same morning. In his memory it remained indelible, like the anguish and pain which never left him.

He looked up at the sky and cried:

“Why this injustice? Why my family?”

He had asked himself the same thing countless times, although he knew the answers which he refused to accept. The Gods were tyrannical egomaniacs and knew neither forgiveness or pity. What had happened to his family was no different to what had happened to many others, where blood had been cruelly and unjustly shed by divine order. His misfortune was nothing more than another drop in a sea of pain, in the ocean of suffering of a whole people.

He recalled the day they had come to take Matis away. He recalled how Olga had thrown herself on the Eye-of-the-God, begging for him not to be taken away. He recalled the fateful spear of the Executor taking his wife’s life. He recalled his son charging at the assassin in his mother’s defense. He recalled the bloodshot eyes of the Executor who killed his son. By the will of the Gods. For having dared to touch one of their servants. For having resisted the divine will.

Everything had happened so fast… in the blink of an eye. Ambuk had no time to react, he could only reach out with his arm in an attempt to stop all that madness and cry out in despair while his astonished eyes watched those terrible events unfold. Yes, he remembered it well, and no matter how much he might want to forget, he never would. At that time the Proxy was his uncle Kulban, from whom he inherited the titles some years later. His uncle had tried to mediate to prevent Matis from being taken, but to no avail. The Eye did not listen to reasons. The Gods wanted the boy, and that was all there was to it. Who and why were irrelevant to the Enforcer of the Gods. He had a mission, and he had come to carry it out or else blood would be shed. And blood was shed.

He still found it hard to believe that the Eye-of-the-God had respected Kulban’s life or his own, since when the warrior servants of the Gods wielded weapons and these ended up soaked in blood, nothing was left alive.

Ambuk looked at the graves and took his leave with a faint smile.

“I’ll come back tomorrow. Today I’ll go on trying to shield my people from trouble at the hands of the Golden, for you, in your memory.”

Filled with melancholy, he went inside the building; he needed a glass of wine to warm his body, and to tend to village matters.

One of his guards was waiting for him.

The guard returned and Ikai looked at her expectantly.

“Follow me, my Lord Proxy Ambuk will receive you now,” she said, and they walked in.

Ikai looked at the building with analytical eyes. He knew it, although it had been a while since he had set foot in it. The Hunters’ duties required them to work with Proxies fairly often, and he had accompanied Master Sejof on occasion to see Proxy Ambuk. He found him in the open inner courtyard, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine. He was propped against soft cushions on a bench with his eyes closed, protected from the cool with a woolen blanket. A servant came with a jar of wine and filled the glass he was holding absentmindedly in one hand. Four armed guards watched the room.

“The Hunter who wished to see you, my lord,” the guard announced.

Ambuk opened his eyes to look at Ikai with a frown. The Proxy was a slender man with short snow-white hair. His eyes were small and blue, and his gaze seemed to hint at a deep sorrow. His appearance was neat, as suited a man of his social position, and he was over fifty. He was a distant relative of the Regent, like most Proxies, since the Regent himself chose them among his kin or among those he sealed alliances with, mainly important families of either merchant or military lineage.

“A Hunter, you say?” he asked hesitantly as he studied him.

Ikai bowed and showed him the symbol of his Ring with due respect.

“It’s all right, thank you, you may leave,” he said, dismissing the guard with a slight wave.

Ikai took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves.

“I know you…” Ambuk said, his eyes opening wide in recognition. “I’ve seen you before, you belong to… Sejof’s group, if I’m not mistaken…”

“You’re not mistaken, my lord. Sejof is my Master Hunter.”

“I see my memory still works. I’m reaching an age in which one is not so sure about things,” he said with a friendly smile.

A little more at ease, Ikai let his shoulders relax.

“What’s your name, Hunter?”

“My name is Ikai.”

“Hmm… your face seems familiar… not only because of your profession… you’re from this county, are you not?”

“Yes, my lord, my farm is not far from here. It belongs to this village, to your jurisdiction.”

“I see. Then that’s why your face seems so familiar.”

Ikai nodded.

“Your eyes… they’re… very striking…”

Ikai lowered his glance in annoyance. He did not like people remarking on his strange eyes. It made him different, something of a misfit. He had spent his whole childhood being teased for it, and children’s cruelty had no limits. But it had also helped him form an armor of solid rock around his feelings.

“Forgive me, it wasn’t my intention to offend you, I simply meant to say they’re very unusual. One is emerald and the other a pale blue, almost grey. I’ve seen these eyes before, in another man.”

Ikai looked up in surprise.

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Siul…”

“I thought as much; it would have been a strange coincidence to have two men with the same peculiar eyes unless they were related.”

“Do you know my father?”

“Yes, we used to be friends, in another time, a better time now long gone, when my family was still alive. The truth is that you look very much like him: tall and strong, with hair the color of chestnuts and those eyes… strange… Yes, you look very much like him, there’s no doubt about it. Have you inherited his character too?”

“Character? I don’t know what you mean, sir…”

“His temperament.”

“I don’t know… I have quite a peaceful nature. From what I know, so did my father.”

“Hah! That’s a good one… Who told you that?”

Ikai blushed.

“Oh, it was your mother Solma, was it?”

Surprised, Ikai nodded. The Proxy knew his parents by name. That was remarkable.

“Let me assure you that your father was also peaceful, but under that restraint, there was always a volcano ready to erupt. Although he controlled himself very well. I rarely saw him lose his temper.”

“Did you know him well?”

“Very well. We were friends in our youth: inseparable, in fact. It was long before I became Proxy. Great friends, until a woman came between us and ruined our friendship. She nearly destroyed it, since youthful love is lived with insufferable intensity, my young Hunter.”

Ikai’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“We were both courting your mother. In her day Solma was a real beauty, she had no rival in the village and she had a temper that couldn’t be tamed. I tried to woo her with gifts, compliments and gallantry. Instead she chose your father, who barely dared say a word to her. The mystery of love… I’ll never understand it. It hurt me so much that we quarreled. And of course I lost… just as I lost your mother. I nearly lost Siul’s friendship as well. But over time my pride healed, reason came back to my mind and we went back to being friends. A little later I met my beloved wife, and I’m grateful to Solma for not choosing me because the joy I knew with my wife was endless.”

Ikai looked at him, so surprised he could not utter a word.

Ambuk smiled, and his eyes, lost in memories, clouded for a moment. But the gleam of intelligence came back into them, and he looked closely at Ikai.

“Today I’m a little melancholic. You’ll have to forgive me.”

“You honor me, sir.”

Ambuk smiled.

“It’s a little unorthodox for a Hunter to come before me, a Proxy, without his Master… I guess the reason for your visit must have nothing to

do with the duties of the Hunters. Is it something personal, perhaps?”

“It is, my lord. You’re a wise man.”

Ambuk gave a short laugh.

“Not at all, my young Hunter. I’m simply an observant man who’s lived and witnessed much at the service of the people, the Regent and the Gods. I’m listening…”

Ikai breathed deeply, summoned up his courage and spoke.

“I’m here before my lord to ask for his help, since it’s needed for someone under his protection.”

“You’re asking me to help someone from the village, someone I have responsibility for?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Go ahead, explain yourself,” Ambuk said, leaving his glass on the table and giving Ikai all his attention.

“It’s my sister… Kyra… she was Selected… and we haven’t heard anything more of her. I can assure you, my lord, that Kyra is a good and humble farmer who works the fields from sunrise to sunset alongside our mother. We’ve fulfilled our quota, she hasn’t done anything to offend the Regent or the Gods. There’s no reason why she should have been taken. I beg your grace that she should be returned to us, we need her at the farm.”

When he heard the request, Ambuk’s face darkened. The smile vanished from his face, and a stern mask replaced his look of friendliness. He stood up and stretched his back.

Ikai watched him, not knowing what to expect. He knew Ambuk was a fair man; his honesty was well known throughout the county. He was one of the few proxies who enjoyed a good reputation. In most villages big enough to be governed by one, the Proxies acted like nobles, living in luxury at the people’s expense. They satisfied the requirements of the Regent by exploiting their domains, knowing that Sesmok would not intervene if the tax demands were met and there were no riots on the part of the rabble. Ikai had seen it first-hand thanks to his profession, which took him constantly around the six counties in search of criminals and fugitives.

The few occasions when the Proxies felt their own necks threatened were when the Enforcers of the Gods demanded something of them. For a poor farmer, to come across an Eye-of-the-Gods or his Executors was the

worst of all nightmares, but it was equally so for a Proxy. The Eyes put an end to the life of a Proxy at the slightest fault, without hesitation, without mercy. After all, they were nothing more than chief slaves who ruled over working slaves. However much they might serve the Golden Gods, when all was said and done they were slaves. And for the Gods and their Enforcers, the life of a slave was not worth the air he breathed.

“I understand she was chosen by the Gods…”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ambuk nodded and began to pace with his hands at his back, his elegant blue and white silk tunic shimmering with every step. He closed his eyes and appeared to be meditating carefully on the subject. Ikai had faith in this man. That was why Ikai had gone to him. He had thought it out, he knew that going to a Proxy entailed a grave risk, but he was sure Ambuk would help him.

The Proxy stopped his pacing and looked up at the sky. After this he looked at Ikai and smiled faintly.

A distant hope crept into Ikai’s heart.

“I understand your worry, Ikai. It’s worthy of you as a brother. The fact that you’ve come to me, a Proxy of the Regent’s, with this request, does you honor, since as a Hunter you know better than many the laws and the mortal consequences of interfering with their enforcement. Although I want to help you, young Ikai, in this my hands are tied. The Law of the Gods is definite and there are no exceptions. Mere mortals can’t understand the designs of the Golden, still less doubt them or try to alter them. Your sister was Summoned and you know the law; whoever is summoned must submit to the will of our masters or suffer their anger. And the Gods’ anger is limitless and implacable. If she was chosen” – Ambuk opened his arms and shrugged in a gesture of impotence – “I would truly like to help you, but there’s nothing I can do for you. Your sister must accept her destiny; the punishment for interfering is death. You know that very well.”

“I know the punishment for opposing the Gods’ designs. That’s not what I’m asking, my lord. Couldn’t you intercede for her before the Regent?”

“The Regent?” Ambuk half-closed his eyes. “Like the rest of us he serves the Gods, he won’t meddle in their wishes. He never does. For no

one, least of all for an unknown and insignificant peasant. Forgive my bluntness, but it's better that you should understand."

"Why does he fear for his life? He's the Regent," Ikai said in a voice which came out higher than he had intended.

Ambuk made a calming gesture with his hands.

"Of course the Regent fears the Gods. For them Sesmok is no more than another man, one with a relevant post, but serving the will of the Golden. The same as me, the same as you. The least resistance on his part might risk his life, and that he will never do, for anybody."

"All right then, if the Regent refuses to help his people, couldn't you address the Eyes-of-the-Gods? Intercede for Kyra before them?"

"Before the Enforcers of the Gods? It wouldn't be any use, and it would be madness. They don't respond to reason or logic. They're on this earth to carry out their masters' orders. They never contradict a divine design, never argue an order, they simply carry them out. That's their purpose, their reason for being, and they don't care about anything else. They're creatures without feelings, cold, calculating; they live for and by the Gods. I don't even believe they have any humanity at all, or if they once did, they lost it a long, long time ago. No, Ikai, the Eyes-of-the-Gods don't listen to reasons. There's no doubt that they'd kill me, then carry on with their tasks without looking back. Not even the Regent himself dares to argue with them. When the Eyes demand, the Regent complies, we comply."

"But there has to be something that can be done!" Ikai cried, seeing hope vanish to be replaced by an anger he found hard to contain.

"I'm very much afraid there's nothing we can do for your sister…"

"There's nothing, or you don't wish to do anything not to risk your neck?"

At the sound of the accusation and the tone of it, the four guards in the room tensed.

Ikai looked at them defiantly, and reached for the pommel of his sword.

"Be easy… young Hunter… there's no need to shed blood…"

Ikai weighed up the situation. There were four guards in the room, but soon enough the two from the door would join them, and there were

probably two more at least at the back of the house. If facing four guards was risky enough, facing eight was crazy. No, this was not time to lose his life, not like this, without reaching his goal. He took his hand away from his sword and relaxed his shoulders.

“You’re right, Proxy Ambuk. There’s no need for bloodshed. I came in search of help, as you are the law in this part of the county. If you can’t help me, I understand. I’ll go on my way.”

“And where will you go?”

“I’ll search for help somewhere else.”

“Nobody can help you, and the sooner you understand that the more chance you have of staying alive. Listen to my advice: don’t go for help to your Master Hunter or the Regent, because they’ll refuse you and your life will be in serious danger. If you make trouble for them, they’ll go for your life because it’s their own which is at risk. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“And, by all that’s precious, don’t you ever go to an Eye or you’ll be dead.”

“You don’t leave me many options…”

“Go back to your farm, or else take up your duties as a Hunter and forget all this business.”

“That I can’t do. I must find my sister.”

“Then I foretell a bad end for you. You’ll die, and soon.”

Ikai swallowed. Ambuk’s words had taken their toll on him, as he knew that was what would happen.

“Can you at least tell me where she’s been taken?”

Ambuk sighed deeply. He thought for a moment with his eyes closed, looked at his guards and with a sign ordered them to leave the room.

“Are you sure, my lord?” one of them asked, nodding towards Ikai.

Ambuk nodded.

“The young Hunter won’t cause us any trouble, am I right?”

Ikai looked him in the eye.

“I won’t cause any trouble, I swear.”

“Leave us alone, all of you,” Ambuk said, looking at his two servants so they too would leave the room.

“Now we’re alone we can talk more freely. Understand that I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing it for Siul, your father, my good friend, and for Solma, an exceptional woman. But I must warn you that what I’m about to tell you might very well cost you your life. The secrets of the Regents and of the Gods must remain secret. Whoever reveals or discovers them risks losing his head.”

Ikai understood, but he had to go on.

“I understand I’m risking my life by asking where a slave shouldn’t. I accept that. If I must die, so be it. Go on, please.”

“All right. One more thing, Ikai. I need your word that everything I’m about to tell you will go to the grave with you. My name must never be mentioned.”

“You have my word of honor. I won’t betray you,” Ikai swore solemnly.

“Good, come with me,” Ambuk said, and they went to the back of the building, to the open garden.

“Here we’ll be safe from indiscreet ears. Walk with me.”

Ambuk put his hands behind his back, looked into Ikai’s eyes as if reading his soul, and nodded.

“I believe you have a good heart, and for that and because of your father I’m going to tell you this. But by telling you I’m condemning you, since knowing it is treason, and treason means death.”

“I’ve made my choice.”

“Very well. Knowing where your sister is being taken is hard to guess. But in general, when the Enforcers take someone, they begin by locking them up in the Dungeons of Oblivion located in the capital. They prepare them for the journey…”

Ikai looked at him in surprise; he knew nothing of this place, and he knew the capital like the back of his hand.

“In the northern part of the city, beyond the Regent’s Palace, in one of the forbidden quadrants, there’s a complex of underground caves whose existence is kept secret. In these enormous caves, where the sun never enters, the Eyes-of-the-Gods ordered a labyrinth of dungeons to be built, to keep whoever they needed imprisoned for whatever time might be necessary. Many people have been sent there. What the Eyes do with the

prisoners is something nobody knows, but the enclosure is walled and the two entrances heavily guarded by Executors. It’s one of the shameful things the Regent keeps from his people. Don’t ask me how this information reached me, but you can take it as solid.”

Ikai was looking at the Proxy attentively, drinking up every fragment of information.

“Do you believe Kyra might be there?”

“It’s very likely that she is there, or has been. That’s all I can say to you.”

“Thank you for trusting me. I’ll search for her there.”

“It’s extremely dangerous, Ikai. If they discover you they’ll kill you on the spot.”

Ikai looked at him and reflected…

“Thank you,” he said at last.

“And if you find her, what will you do? You can’t fight the Eyes and the Executors on your own. Besides, they have the support of the Regent and his Guard. It’s madness, Ikai, let it go, the path you’re taking leads to death. They already have your sister, you’ll only manage to get yourself killed.”

Ikai looked up at the sky. He inhaled deeply, then let out his breath again.

“I can’t. I must save her. If I must die, I will.”

“Let it be so,” Ambuk said, looking at his beloved departed family. “Can I help you in any other way?”

“The capital is a long distance away…”

Ambuk understood.

“I’ll have a horse made ready for you.”

“Thank you, I won’t forget this.”

“On the contrary… Do just that…”

Ikai nodded, understanding.

“May the Mother Sea take pity on you, Hunter.”

Ikai wished it so with all his soul.

6

The metallic sound became stronger.

Someone was coming for them.

Kyra looked towards the ceiling, although she had never been able either to see it or reach it. It was too high. Once she had tried standing on Yosane's shoulders in an attempt to reach it, but in vain.

"Above? Are you sure?" she whispered.

"I think so," Yosane replied.

They heard a new sound, but this time it was a different one, rock sliding on rock. A rectangular opening was revealed in the ceiling, and suddenly an intense radiance filled the chamber, completely blinding the two prisoners. They covered their eyes with their arms and turned their backs on the light, trying to escape the piercing brightness which burnt their eyes.

A metal platform descended slowly from the opening, and a dull buzz filled the room.

Fearing for her life, Kyra tried to glimpse what was going on, but the light was too strong and completely blinded her. They moved away instinctively, seeking shelter against the wall, as far away as possible.

A deep metallic voice barked an order.

"Stop, don't move!"

Kyra, her heart in her mouth, put her hand over her eyes to protect them and tried to open the right one a little. All she could see before the light blinded her and forced her to close it again were two huge bodies with sinister helmets.

"Damn! Executors!"

"Oh no! What do they want?" Yosane cried in total panic.

Kyra turned to the warrior servants. Still blinded, she raised her fists to confront them.

Heavy footsteps echoed on the floor, followed by a cavernous laugh which spat disdain.

“Stupid slave!”

Kyra threw a blind punch with her right fist, which hit nothing. She felt a violent slap on her face. She hit her head against the wall and fell to one side with a stifled moan.

“Come on, you’ve been summoned!” came the deep grunting voice, echoing against the walls.

Kyra tried to stand and defend herself, but a powerful hand pulled her by the hair forcefully and dragged her along the floor to the platform. Yosane’s screams as the same happened to her made Kyra’s blood boil, but in her dizziness and blindness there was little she could do.

The platform began to rise.

Kyra half-opened one eye and saw two heavy boots over ochre-colored flesh and muscle. Once again the brightness hit her and she was forced to close her eyes.

The platform reached the surface and the Executors dragged them remorselessly by the hair.

“Stay put!” one of the Enforcers barked, and they were left lying there on the ground.

Yosane sobbed beside her.

“Stay strong, don’t let these brutes see your fear.”

Yosane muttered a muffled *yes*, and once again silence surrounded them. But this time there was no darkness; they were in a spherical chamber whose floor and ceiling were silver, with a faint golden light coming from runes on the black walls. They stayed there on the floor until their eyes had adjusted to the light and they were able to open them. There was no escape, but nor was there any sign of an Enforcer either, which made Kyra feel a little better, though not much. A round fountain with a powerful stream of water which rose to the ceiling dominated this new chamber. On a pedestal they saw clothing and footwear.

They got to their feet and looked at each other. For a moment a shy smile of relief passed between them. They had shared captivity in the dark for days without seeing each other once, and now at last they were able to take a good look.

“You’re not the way I’d imagined,” Kyra said with a smile.

Yosane was short, with dark, very straight hair. Her small grey eyes shone with intelligence in a round face. She was small, with fine snow-white skin, even though now it was covered with grime. The tunic she was wearing was nearly unrecognizable with dirt, but it was of good quality, as were her shoes. It was obvious she was not a peasant girl like Kyra.

“But you are, just a bit, with that curly hair and those fiery eyes,” replied Yosane with a shy smile.

Kyra nodded. “How old are you…?”

“I turned seventeen this Spring,” Yosane said. “And you?”

“Seventeen too, this Summer. I had the impression you were younger.”

“I look younger because of my height, but I’m seventeen.” Yosane’s eyes flashed. “That might be significant.”

Kyra shrugged. “I leave the riddles to you, you have a better head on your shoulders than me.” She turned and surveyed their surroundings uneasily. Suddenly part of the rock wall came down and disappeared into the floor with a loud noise. A passage was revealed.

An Eye-of-the-God appeared in the darkness. Three armed Executors followed him.

Kyra’s blood froze, and for an instant she forgot to breathe.

The Enforcers of the Gods walked towards them.

Yosane stood behind Kyra, her hands shaking. Kyra straightened up, trying to hide her fear.

The Eye stood in front of her, a single step away. His helmet was closed, both halves of the great silver diamond hiding the horrifying Eye which Kyra had no desire to see. She tried to see her own reflection in the two silver halves, but they reflected nothing back. The servant pointed at the fountain, then the pedestal.

“Clean up and get yourselves dressed, quickly.” The voice was so shrill that it did not sound human. It hurt the ears.

Kyra hesitated.

“Now!” the Eye ordered, and the high-pitched shriek of his voice made the two girls move back a step.

Kyra wanted to confront the servant. She clenched her fists and tensed.

Yosane pulled her arm towards the bench.

“Come on, Kyra,” she urged.

Kyra went on staring at the Eye-of-the-God defiantly. She would not show him fear. Nor would she show him submission.

“Lower your gaze at once and bow your head, or else take leave of your life,” the Eye threatened.

Yosane pulled on her arm: “Please, Kyra, come on…”

There was a moment of dangerous tension. The Eye began to turn towards his Executors and Kyra, in a moment of sanity, decided to heed Yosane instead of letting her temper get the better of her. She bowed her head. Rage rose within her chest, seeking to burst out at her mouth.

Then came the strident voice of the Eye: “That’s better. Show respect to your betters. Clean up and get dressed.”

The two prisoners went over to the pedestal, where they found aromatic herbs to wash with. Reluctantly, they went to the fountain and turned to gaze at their captors.

The Eye watched them. “Be quick!” he ordered, then turned on his heels and left the chamber. The three Executors remained watching, like statues, their sinister presence filling the chamber.

Kyra and Yosane washed as quickly as they could. Although they felt the situation was humiliating, the pressure of fear and the chance to clean themselves and change clothes made them leave their modesty to one side. They stank horribly. They put on the clean white tunics, richly made, ornamented with opulent silver embroidery. The footwear was also of excellent quality. Kyra had never worn anything so luxurious, and suddenly she felt strange. Why were they being allowed to wash and being given those clothes? She could not understand it.

She looked at the Executors. They were like stone statues. She considered the sinister helmets: the two silver triangles, one above the dark slit of the eyes and the other below, which curved and elongated at the ends, like the blade of a curved dagger. If she could manage to break off the two pieces she would have two knives to defend herself with… One of the Executors turned his head towards her. The black slit turned red and two bloodthirsty eyes stared at her. A chill ran down her spine as if someone had put an icy hand at the nape of her neck. She looked away.

A while went by and nothing happened. They relaxed. While they were waiting, Yosane began to draw on the floor with her wet finger.

“What are you drawing?” Kyra asked, intrigued.

“Oh, nothing, really…”

“Could you draw my home, the Sixth County?”

“I can do better than that. I can draw the capital and the six counties.”

Kyra nodded repeatedly in excitement. For somebody illiterate like her, to be shown something like that seemed a wonder.

Yosane wetted her finger in the fountain and drew a small circle on the dustiest part of the floor. It had been a long time since someone had been in that chamber.

“This is the capital, and in its center —” she marked it with a dot — “is the great Sacred Monolith.”

Kyra looked on, spellbound.

Yosane wetted her finger again and drew a large circle which contained the earlier one.

“This is the Boundary.”

Kyra’s eyes opened wide.

“Ooooh, I see…”

Yosane divided the right half of the large circle into three equal parts.

“The first, second and third counties, the richest.”

“And the great river Zibai?” Kyra asked.

Yosane drew a line which crossed the three counties.

Kyra smiled.

“Go on, go on…” she urged.

The finger dipped in the water again and drew the remaining three counties in the left half of the circle.

“The fourth, fifth, and then yours, Kyra, the sixth: the poorest, because the great Zibai doesn’t bathe them, only its lesser tributaries.”

Kyra had never seen a map or anything like it before, nor had anybody ever shown her either the way the counties were divided or their shape. That drawing on the dusty floor seemed unbelievable to her.

“It’s… it’s… like a cartwheel…”

“That’s right. It’s impressively simple and clear, a brilliant design in every way.”

“Are all the counties the same size?”

“Yes, the area they make up, the land, it’s the same for all of them.”

“And from the capital to the Boundary, is there the same distance everywhere?” Kyra asked, measuring with her index and little fingers from the monolith to the outer rims of the Boundary.

“Yes, it’s a perfect circle. It’s been measured on several occasions. Among the builders this design is well known. Outside the guild it’s kept secret. The Enforcers don’t want it to be known among the peasants. In my opinion it’s because it’s much more difficult for people to try to escape or hide if they don’t know which direction to go in. Most of the people who flee do it without any knowledge, without any direction, and that’s why it’s easy to catch and execute them.”

“I think what you’re saying makes a lot of sense. The more ignorant we are, the less we can resist.”

“That’s right, and that’s why the majority of the people are illiterate, and the Gods, through their Enforcers, make sure it stays that way.”

Kyra stared at the drawing with her mouth open.

“It’s unbelievable. I never thought it would be like this.”

“Neither you nor most of the people who live in it. It’s a very well-thought-out design, the work of the Gods, an enormous prison, very well laid out and built. Now you’re one of the few who know.”

Kyra smiled and thanked Oxatsi, Mother Sea, for having provided her with such an intelligent and good-hearted friend. Behind them they heard footsteps, and Yosane hurriedly erased the drawing.

“Get moving!” The Eye had returned.

Kyra took Yosane’s hand.

“Stay close to me,” she whispered.

The Executors led them through a labyrinth of narrow tunnels. Kyra had no idea where they were; she was completely disoriented. Without a word the Executors led them though the somber underground level, one leading the way and the other two following the girls closely, prodding them with their spears if they lagged. The Eye brought up the rear. They went up a flight of stone stairs at the mouth of one of the tunnels and came out on to the surface, inside a walled courtyard. They crossed a great metal door guarded by Executors and found themselves in the streets of the city.

All of a sudden, summoning horns echoed to the sky. Kyra was startled. What on earth was happening? She looked around uncertainly, and gestured inquiringly at her friend. Yosane shrugged, her eyes fearful. They went on. Kyra thought about trying to escape before they got to wherever they were being taken, but it would be folly. She would have to fight three warriors of brutal strength, armed and alert. However much she might want to, and in her guts she did, it would be an act of madness which could only end badly. No, better wait for some real chance to escape. The horns sounded once again over the city, echoing in streets and on roofs.

They turned a corner, and a large square appeared before their eyes.

“It’s the Great Square, we’re in the capital!” said Yosane.

The square was crowded with people. Kyra stopped in surprise. It was rectangular and completely flat, with a shining white granite floor. It could hold several thousand people, and it was full. Tall, well-kept buildings surrounded it, adorned with blue banners. On the north side a hundred marble steps ascended from the square to a platform. And there she saw it. The mysterious object she had heard so much about.

The Sacred Monolith. The artifact of the Gods.

It was much bigger that Kyra might have imagined, totally black, spectacularly tall — more than a hundred and twenty feet tall and fifteen wide — and perfectly rectangular. Its spotless dark surface shone in the faint winter sun. It rose, dominating the square, the whole city. Such a remarkable arcane aura issued from it that Kyra felt goose-bumps. She was speechless. Behind the monolith she saw an enormous palace with great golden columns, of sublime architectural beauty, which filled the whole north side of the square. There was no doubt that this was Regent Sesmok’s palace.

The northern part of the city was higher up, on a plateau. Kyra shaded her eyes with her hand and looked towards the south. She could make out the main avenue in the distance. It was tremendously wide, decorated with stone statues representing proud warriors and pretty maidens carrying musical instruments and amphorae. The streets and the buildings of the great city seemed well-tended, built of good granite and even finished with decorative details in marble and colored ceramics; their beauty was something which Kyra had not anticipated, used as she was to the simplicity

of poverty. She looked down at the floor she was walking on and saw that even the slabs under her feet were made of good stone.

She scanned the south eastern part of the square and saw fountains and gardens on both sides of the great avenue, as well as grand houses with great porticoes and beautiful round columns. Kyra stared at them all, open-mouthed. They were far more impressive than she had imagined.

“That’s the Merchants’ Quarter,” Yosane whispered at her side, following her gaze.

Kyra nodded.

“At the end, to the south, is the Craftsmen’s Quarter, near the wall. That’s where my home is.”

Looking in that direction, Kyra noticed that the houses in the lower part of the city, along the wall, were much plainer, and there were hardly any grand houses. The class division was evident in the great city. The rich merchants had built their palaces in the center of town, on both sides of the great avenue.

She looked again at the crowded square. What was going on? Why were they there? One of the Executors pushed her with his spear, forcing her to move forward. She went on uneasily; that giant artifact of the Golden made her deeply nervous. In front of it on a platform two people were waiting, dressed in rich silks.

“Regent Sesmok and High Priest Torkem,” whispered Yosane, nodding in their direction.

Behind them several Eyes-of-the-Gods waited, arms crossed behind. And to one side, a sinister sight: Three young women were hanging by their arms from a wooden structure. Their feet did not reach the ground. They looked unconscious, or dead.

Yosane gave a cry of anguish when she saw them. Kyra noticed that one of them was moaning with pain, and another glanced at her momentarily before she fainted. They were alive, though barely. Kyra and Yosane were led by the Executors until they were facing the unfortunate victims. Kyra stared at the body of one of the girls; her entire left side was blackened, as if burnt to charcoal. She stole a glance to the other two hanging beside her, and both showed the same signs. She looked away in fear and disgust.

Two Executors came to stand beside them. With their spears they indicated to Kyra and Yosane that they should look at the crowd which had gathered. The two girls exchanged uncertain looks, but did as they were told. At their feet, the thousands of people who filled the great square and its surroundings waited in silence. It seemed that the whole capital had come to witness this sinister spectacle.

“I have summoned you here today, my beloved people—” a powerful voice thundered.

“It’s Regent Sesmok,” whispered Yosane nervously, while Sesmok continued:

“—so that you can witness with your own eyes how useless and foolish it is to try and deceive the Gods.”

The crowd remained silent. Kyra watched him. He was a hard man: thin, middle-aged, with his head shaven. His nose was aquiline, and his eyes were tiny, black and deeply-sunken, eyes that were filled with danger.

“These young women you see here hanging in shackles tried to trick the Gods. They tried to hide, to outwit the Divine Summons. They were Selected, and in their stupidity and ignorance they did not attend the Summons, but chose to hide. And that is the reason why they are hanging here now, suffering their well-deserved punishment, nobody can escape the wishes of the Gods. Nobody.”

Kyra began to understand. She looked to her left and saw a group of Hunters. It was not Ikai’s group; it was led by a very tall, muscular and weathered Master Hunter with hair as white as snow. She guessed they had been hunting, chasing after those poor girls, who after being chosen, and probably driven by fear, had tried to escape or hide before being found by the Enforcers. Kyra knew it was not possible to escape; Ikai had told her so. The Boundary could not be crossed, not with those cursed Rings which imprisoned them. But there were rumors, unsure and whispered in secret, about some who had managed it.

She looked at the group of Hunters and guessed that those unfortunate girls had gone into hiding. But the Hunters always found their prey; that she knew for certain. *Better them than the Executors…* she thought bitterly. But when she looked at those blackened bodies she knew they had passed through the merciless hands of the Enforcers of the Gods. That was not the work of the Hunters.

“Look at them carefully. That is what awaits those who do not obey the law of the Golden. Nobody can hide, nobody can escape. I, your Regent, assure you of this. The law of the Gods, and under that the laws of the Regent, must always be obeyed, or else pay the consequences: consequences steeped in pain and suffering. High Priest Torkem…”

The religious leader stepped forward. He was a round man, with a large double chin and flat nose. He was bald except for a lock of white hair decorating the top of his head. Kyra’s stomach turned. Torkem raised his tearful brown eyes to the crowd and prayed to the Golden Gods: a prayer in the form of a lugubrious chant of submission. The crowd knelt, paying homage to the Gods, as was fitting. Kyra wanted to resist instead of joining in that act of submission, but the Executor’s spear pressed menacingly against her shoulder. She gave in, looking defiantly at the Executor. The slit on his helmet lit up and the blood-red eye met her gaze.

Kyra looked away, clenching her jaw.

“By the grace of the Gods, our people subsist and prosper,” the High Priest proclaimed. “We are on this earth to serve our lords, to do their divine will. That is our glorious duty. That is the true path we must follow. Whatever the Gods ask of us, that we must always do, since their word is law, and their will our duty.”

The High Priest gestured, and all bent to touch their foreheads to the ground, in a sign of total submission to the grace of the Gods.

“In their divine goodness they allow us to go on living. But our masters do not forget, nor do they forgive, when our corrupt hearts, blinded by power, dare to confront them and their benevolent designs. No, they do not forget, nor do they forgive this, their chosen people, for not accepting them a thousand years ago. Even so, the Golden, in their infinite divine kindness, allow us to go on living under their protective wings. Dear people, faithfully must we serve the Gods, since without their grace we would perish.”

Kyra felt sick at this message, which the clergy drummed into them again and again from childhood onwards. A message of servitude and slavery, a message she would never accept no matter how much this fat pompous priest proclaimed it to the four winds.

Torkem went over to the unfortunate girls and pointed at them with a clear expression of reproach, shaking his head visibly.

“Here you can see one more proof of their greatness and benevolence. Those who did not answer their summons, those who believed they could mock the wishes of the Golden, hang now for their sins, with their bodies marked by the sin committed.”

Torkem walked down to where Kyra and Yosane were standing. Pointing at them, he said with a broad smile:

“On the other hand those who did answer the summons as was their duty, those who were fortunate enough to be chosen by our Gods, as you can all see with your own eyes, are perfectly well,” he said, waving his hand toward Kyra and Yosane.

Kyra wanted to protest. She opened her mouth, her eyes burning with rage, but Torkem noticed. Swiftly, the cunning cleric moved to her side and held her tightly.

“If you say a single word I’ll have your tongue cut out and shoved down your throat. Then I’ll find your family and do the same to them,” he whispered in her ear.

Kyra was reduced to silence.

Torkem smiled at her broadly, then turned to the audience again.

“Our duty, the reason for our existence, is to serve the Gods. We are their people, and by their kindness we exist. We serve our Golden masters today and forever.” He raised his arms toward the Great Monolith and finished with another prayer, looking at the Eyes all the time as though seeking their approval.

Regent Sesmok straightened. “Return now to your tasks. Do not forget what you have seen here today. Remember that the benevolence of the Gods is not infinite, and their implacable justice will be felt. You will all leave now.”

The crowd began to disperse slowly, in silence.

Kyra gave Torkem a look of hatred, but he completely ignored her as if she did not exist, then went to join Regent Sesmok.

“Let them hang one more day,” Sesmok told Torkem. “I want everybody to witness what happens to those who don’t follow the Summons. But make sure they stay alive, they mustn’t die.”

“It shall be done,” Torkem said with a bow. “And these two?”

Sesmok shrugged. “They belong to the Gods, the Eyes will deal with them. They’re not our problem.” The two men turned on their heels and left.

Yosane went up to Kyra unnoticed, with the two Executors hovering over them.

“What do you think they’ll do to us now?”

“They’ve used us as a fake example to fool the people. Now our true destiny awaits us.”

“What?” Yosane asked. Her face was agonized.

“Let’s go!” the Executor ordered, and prodded Kyra with his spear.

Kyra made a fist to Yosane, to encourage her to be strong. They led them to the three Eyes at the top of the stairs. Behind them loomed the giant Monolith.

The Eye-of-the-God in the middle took a step forward.

“On your knees, slaves,” he ordered with a shriek.

The two girls knelt. Kyra risked a glance. The helmet emitted a sound and the silver diamond split into its two triangles, which opened to reveal the great Eye.

A beam of light ran along Yosane’s body, then along Kyra’s. She felt such revulsion that she closed her eyes,

Something cold touched her forehead.

And the night took her.

7

A muffled cry reached Ikai from the West. He pulled on the reins of his mount, and the obedient horse slowed down from its gallop. Puzzled, he turned in the saddle. The movement jerked his side painfully, warning him to be careful. He bent over, cringing, and swore under his breath. His wounds were still tender.

A new scream, higher pitched, was heard in the forest. Ikai scrutinized the trees but could see nothing. Night was falling and there was barely any light now. He hesitated, then went into the poplar wood, leading his horse warily. All his senses were alert. He took an arrow from his quiver and nocked his bow. He went on, guided by the brightness of a camp fire, until he reached a clearing. He stopped and looked on in silence. Two men were entertaining themselves by beating an old man they had tied to a tree. Two others were searching the bloodied bodies of two men. Ikai studied them carefully. They were Pariahs: outlaws. They had assaulted these poor people and would leave no-one alive. Ikai knew that kind of men well, since his job was to hunt them down. Extremely dangerous men, since death pursued them night and day for the rest of their usually short lives. They had broken the laws of the Gods and were therefore condemned to death. They survived in hiding, always on the run, killing for food or coin. They lived in the most absolute desperation, and Ikai knew that the most dangerous man is the one who has nothing to lose.

He half-closed his eyes and analyzed the situation: intervene and try to save that poor man or not? It was a decision which put his life at risk and would delay him in his real purpose. *He's just an old man, he won't live much longer anyway… I have a mission to carry out. I don't even want to think what Kyra might be going through,* he said to himself, considering the situation. He was about to turn away when he heard a new moan of pain from the poor man. *Damn it! Damned conscience!* he muttered and went into the clearing.

"Let him be!" he ordered in an authoritarian voice.

The four outlaws turned at once. One of them, big and muscular, with a long black beard, brandished a curved sword at Ikai.

“Go on your way and you’ll stay alive,” he said with an ironic grin.

“Look at me well, Pariah.”

“He’s a Hunter!” said a small man with a mocking expression who was wielding two knives.

They all looked around nervously, looking for new threats, but saw none.

The big man with the beard looked at Ikai in annoyance.

“A Hunter, alone? That’s a strange thing to see. Are you lost?”

“Leave that man alone and go on your way.”

A tall man with tangled hair and hooked nose unsheathed a sword. His partner, bald and thick-set, his face marked with a scar, did the same.

“You’re a Hunter, you’ll go after us and kill us one by one,” said the man with the mocking expression.

“Today I’m not here to hunt. Let him be and clear out. I won’t say that again.”

The big man laughed heartily. “Even if I believed you, that horse you’re riding is worth more than the life of all of us, including yours. On the black market they’d pay a lot for it and for your equipment too… You have to understand, I can’t let you leave. Nothing personal.”

Ikai took a deep breath.

“Kill him!” the leader cried at the top of his voice.

Unfortunately Ikai had already anticipated a reply like that. It was the most logical one. He let fly an arrow the instant the order came to an end. He caught the nearest outlaw right in the chest, the little man with the mocking look. The arrow sank into his flesh with a dull sound. The Pariah looked down at his torso, his face a show of incredulity. He took a step to one side and fell to the ground dead.

Ikai’s mind weighed up the next threat. The tallest outlaw was coming at him at a run on his left and the bald, daring one on the right. Ikai calculated the time he had left, and acted. He shot the tall man who was coming swiftly at him, sword in hand. The arrow pierced his right eye, killing him instantly. His sword fell and his body slumped.

A cry of rage reached him from his right. He had no time to nock his bow again. He dropped it. The outlaw's sword glinted in the night, searching for his side. Ikai let his body fall on the other side of his horse. He got off an instant before being struck. He put his hands out and rolled into the fall, unable to prevent a groan of pain as his injured side was twisted.

"Come here, you damned Hunter!" the man cried in frustration.

Ikai got to his feet and put his hand behind him. The outlaw, eyes filled with hate, attacked at a run. He was met by a whiplash blow from Ikai's arm. The small throwing dagger whistled past and sank to its hilt in the man's neck. The Pariah reached Ikai without even realizing he was already dead. He struck with his sword, but Ikai moved aside with ease and avoided the blow. The outlaw tried to breathe, but could not. He fell to the ground with his hands at his throat, drowning in his own blood.

"You bastard!" the leader thundered. "I'll send you to see those disgusting Gods you serve!"

The giant launched into a run. Ikai waited. He took a deep breath to keep calm, unsheathed his sword and breathed out. The outlaw reached him and struck with such force that he would have cloven the shield and arm of even the best-prepared warrior. But Ikai did not block the blow; he had already foreseen the brutish man's enormous strength. He stepped aside skillfully, and the sword hissed as it cut the air a hand-span away from his neck. With calculated coolness Ikai launched a vertical stroke which took the outlaw in the arm. Blood began to flow from the cut.

He gave Ikai a glare of pure hatred. "It won't be some dirty Hunter, a cursed servant of those Gods who kills me!"

Filled with fury, he hit out again with all the strength of his huge shoulders, as if he were going to fell a tree with a single blow. Ikai waited coolly till the last moment and leapt like a cat to avoid the sword, which grazed his stomach. He countered and gave the outlaw a second deep cut in the leg.

The giant cursed at the top of his voice, clutching his wounded leg. "I've got nothing to lose!" he said furiously. "I'm a Pariah and I know it. There's no future for me. I chose to escape rather than be sent to the quarries, that's my sin."

“That was your own choice, just as it was your choice to confront me when you could have chosen otherwise.”

“What rights do those tyrannical, ruthless Gods have to decide my destiny, or any man’s? Who gives them the right to establish the Quotas? Why must I work in the quarry for them? They’ve got no right. I don’t have to obey them. I don’t!”

“You don’t discuss the law of the Gods, you carry it out,” Ikai replied as he had been trained to.

With eyes aware of the end which was awaiting him, the giant raised his sword with both hands for a final blow. Ikai looked at him straight in the eye and shook his head. He did not wish to kill him. The Pariah returned the glance, deep and honest, an echo of the man he had once been and would never be again.

“I won’t let you turn me in so that the Eyes-of-the-Gods can torture me to death in front of the people as a public example. No, I’d rather die here.”

The sword came down toward Ikai’s head. The Hunter raised his own quickly and parried the giant’s blow. His steel went straight through the outlaw’s heart. The giant fell to his knees. When his eyes turned to Ikai, they were moist.

“It wasn’t me, it was the Gods…”

Ikai felt sorry for the man, for one moment. Then he saw the dead bodies of the innocent men.

“The Gods were cruel with you, true, but you chose this path.”

The giant fell back, dead.

Ikai went across to the old man and cut the ties that bound him to the tree. The old man collapsed into his arms. With the utmost care Ikai laid him on the ground.

“Thank you… thank you, Hunter…” he stammered.

His face was purple and both eyes were swollen; one of them he could not even open. He was bleeding from nose and mouth, but the worst was his torso. He had been tortured with ugly cuts which would become infected if they were not stitched, and he would either die from that or else bleed to death slowly. Thinking about it, Ikai found it hard to believe that the man had survived such harsh treatment at his age.

“You are a tough old man…” Ikai said as he checked his wounds.

“I have… I have a lot to live for…”

Ikai looked at him in puzzlement. He must be in his seventies… His face was like parchment, his hair and beard as white as snow, and under his torn tunic he was no more than skin and bone. A lot to live for? He should have been dead already, since very few reached that sort of age. The harshness of life, or the Gods, finished them off much earlier. Very few reached fifty. But something caught Ikai’s attention. The man’s one open eye, an intense blue, gleamed with intelligence. For a moment he seemed to glimpse the old man studying him, bringing some unknown wisdom to bear.

“This is going to hurt…”

The old man nodded at Ikai, closing his eyes.

Ikai placed his fingers over the old man’s nose and with a dry snap put it back in place.

The old man cried out in pain. After a moment of intense agony, he threw his head back.

“Very good. I’m going to get a curved needle and some thread I have in my bag. We’d better close those ugly cuts.”

“Thank you… Hunter… this old man will be able to fight one more day…”

Ikai looked at him again. His clothes were of good quality and his hair and beard were well trimmed. There was no dirt under his nails. He looked at the man’s Golden Ring and saw the symbol of the Horse; he was a Merchant, and judging by his attire a prosperous one…

“You’re a strange one, old man.”

“My name is… Gedrel, I’m a Merchant… to the Gods…”

“To the Gods?”

“Yes… to men… I’m something… very different…”

Ikai looked at him, not understanding. One could not be something else. The Gods allowed a single trade, that of your family or the one they gave you. It could only be changed at the requirement of the Gods and their dreaded Quotas. But even so, one went on to have a new trade assigned by the Eyes-of-the-Gods and controlled by the Proxies. No one could be more than one thing. The Gods forbade anything else. One man, one profession, one job, that was the law. Anyone who did not do his job or could not work

was condemned to death. A man who did not produce had no value in the eyes of the Gods.

“We can only be one thing, the law says so.”

“The law of the Gods… not that of men, young Hunter…”

“Ikai, my name is Ikai, and you shouldn’t talk like that, you’re courting death.”

The old man smiled. “You think so?”

Ikai shook his head. “I’d better tend to your wounds, Gedrel. I’m afraid you’re rambling.”

“An… unexpected… pleasure… Ikai…”

“It was chance. I heard the screams.”

“Maybe… maybe not…” he said, his face contorted with pain.

Ikai shrugged and went for his things. This old man was certainly odd. He worked on the wounds skillfully and as gently as he could. It was not the first time he had had to sew someone’s wounds. Being a Hunter entailed certain risks. He thought about his dead comrades and wished they could be in some better place, where men did not live to serve the wishes of Gods. He was annoyed by the thought. He should not think like that, it was more like something Kyra would think; he had a better head on his shoulders. Things were what they were, and that kind of thought only drove a man to the grave.

Gedrel lost consciousness. Ikai applied the disinfectant moss to the wounds and finished the treatment. He remained looking at the old man’s kind face. His breathing was weak, almost imperceptible: he might never open his eyes again… But at least he was resting without pain and the mask of agony had left his face. The moon rode high and beautiful in a clear starry sky, and a glint on his Ring made him think about the old man’s strange words.

Ikai remembered clearly the fateful day when his Golden Ring had been imposed on him. He was seven. Until that day he had enjoyed a freedom he would never experience again. He had been happy, he had been allowed to play with Kyra on the farm, with other children in the village, without duties, without servitude. And he had savored that short freedom, enjoying every unworried day, unaware that it would be so brief. The moment came for the Gods to claim their divine right, and Ikai was

presented at the Ritual of Trades. He remembered the square filled with people and the black smoke of the torches rising towards the full moon. He advanced toward the platform, holding on to his father's hand. Siul bent over to look into his eyes. Ikai remembered his father's eyes, because they were identical to his own.

"Don't be afraid," he said with a wink, his face kind and loving.

"I'm not, Father." Ikai was not afraid, not with him.

"That's my boy. Never let fear get the better of you, use it and fight back."

Ikai pondered those words and nodded. Behind came his mother and Kyra. His sister's nose was dirty, and she was looking sullenly at the crowd.

Solma came up to Ikai. "Do as you are told, don't complain and don't say anything." The gravity in his mother's voice made him pay attention to her. He nodded twice. Suddenly a white flash, followed by a deafening buzzing, burst out in the square. Ikai was momentarily dazzled. He protected his eyes with his arm. The buzzing became so intense that his ears hurt. He opened his mouth and moved his jaw, trying to ease them. He looked around searching for the origin of that unpleasant sound. It came from the Rings. They were all emitting a buzzing which seemed to be growing in intensity, as if they were intended to torture the mind. He looked at his parents' faces; their eyes were half-closed, their faces were bleak and their shoulders sagged. They too were suffering under the terrible sound.

Kyra shook her head in protest. "Stop it, my ears hurt!"

"Be quiet, children, cover your ears with your hands, it'll soon be over," their father assured them.

Ikai and Kyra did so, and after a short while the buzzing stopped.

"It's time," Solma said, and they walked to the eastern side of the square, following the crowd.

Then Ikai understood where they were going: to the Temple of the Golden Gods. The imposing building presided over the square with its arcane air. It was spherical in shape, and completely golden. On its façade strange runes had been carved. Only the Eyes-of-the-Gods knew their meaning and function. It was a forbidden building, which only the Enforcers of the Gods could have access to. In each of the six counties was a similar temple whose function was to house the Eyes and host the ceremonies the Gods required of their enslaved people.

The blinding flash came again and Ikai covered his ears. The insufferable buzzing echoed anew. All approached the temple entrance. The great round doors remained sealed. In front of them an altar had been erected between two great braziers which lit up the night. They walked toward the summoning. From the western part of the square he saw Proxy Kulban appear at a stately walk, looking solemn. Beside him came a Priest. Kulban wore a rich dress robe of intense blue, and the Priest the same in deep purple. They were followed by a dozen of the Proxy's armed guards. They took up their positions before the doors of the temple and knelt down.

All those present knelt down as well, their faces sad, their shoulders sagging. The doors opened. From the shadows appeared an Eye-of-the-God, followed by his Executors. The crowd fell silent at once. For the third time the flash coming from the Rings filled the night and the infernal buzzing returned to torture their ears. And the ceremony began. When the buzzing stopped, the Proxy and the Priest stood up and faced the kneeling crowd. Behind them, expectantly, stood the sinister Eye, with his henchmen of death. Proxy Kulban turned to the people.

"The first night of the Full Moon of Spring is the night of the year chosen by our Gods for the Ritual of Trades. Every year, at midnight, all those families with members of the age denoted who have no occupation must come to the capital of the county and the Golden Temple. This is the law of the Gods and thus must be obeyed."

The crowd listened without a sound. Ikai glanced at his mother, and her face seemed to be filled with sadness. He watched his father, who was looking stern and biting his lip. In his eyes he thought he saw… rage…

"To ensure the divine law is fulfilled, I as Proxy, here tonight bear witness," Kulban went on. The Priest took a step forward and prayed to the Golden Gods, thanking them for their greatness, benevolence and mercy. To Ikai it seemed that he heard a muffled murmur of disapproval.

"The children who are now seven years of age must now be presented by their families to be Ringed," he said.

When Ikai heard this, he finally realized what it was all about. He looked up at his father, who nodded in somber resignation. Ikai understood.

"Come forward, present your young ones in order that the Gods may accept them and assign them a job in their service," the Priest said, and went on with his harangue. He thanked the Gods for their mercy and

benevolence, showing them the submission of the people, praying for a year of good harvests, with neither plagues or illnesses for the people who faithfully served their masters.

Ikai, led by his father, walked up to the altar between the two great braziers. The Eye stood behind the altar. His helmet gave a metallic sound, and the two triangular silver halves parted to reveal an enormous golden Eye on a deep black background. The iris was made up of thousands of tiny flecks of ochre and gold, and the pupil was sky-blue. The Eye looked at Ikai with that irrationally large orb, which seemed to read his soul, and his blood froze. In that moment he felt fear, a fear that behind that divine eye there was no humanity. His father put his hand on his shoulder, and Ikai grew calmer. Four huge Executors came to stand beside them. The Eye pointed to the altar. He carried a golden volume in his left hand and a strange silver gauntlet, with incrustations and golden runes, on his right. It was massive, metallic and rectangular in shape, and appeared very heavy and sturdy.

Two of the Executors held Ikai's arms. The boy looked at his father, who glanced at the two other Executors who had come to stand beside him. They were armed with spears and were huge, with wide shoulders, more than a head taller than Siul. Ikai who had always seen his father as the strongest man in the world, realized at that moment that this was not the case. His father sighed and nodded. Ikai felt nervous. He did not know what was happening, but he was scared. The Executors laid him down on the altar. As they did so, Ikai noticed that the surface was hollow, with the shape of a boy carved inside it. He was dipped in some thick substance, with the exception of his arms which were supported higher up and remained visible. The two Executors held him, one to each arm, and Ikai's heart began to pound.

"Name?" Proxy Kulban asked.

"Ikai," replied his father.

"Family occupation?"

"Farmer."

The Proxy looked at the Eye. The sinister servant of the Gods noted something down in his book and nodded.

"Farmer is your Trade, and farmer will be the Trade of your son, by family," Kulban pronounced.

The Eye-of-the-God left the volume on the altar. He picked up a completely smooth, polished black ring. It looked as if it had been forged from a piece of night itself. The Eye bent over Ikai and placed the ring on his left wrist. He closed the silver gauntlet over it and intoned a droning, jarring chant. A bright golden flash came out of the thick metallic glove, and Ikai felt a burning heat on his arm. The flash lasted a brief moment and the heat turned to fire. Ikai closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, trying to bear the suffering with dignity. But the pain grew stronger. He began to scream, but one of the Executors stuffed a cloth in his mouth, muffling the sound. Ikai tried to kick. The pain was insufferable, but it was impossible to free himself because of the two Executors who held him firmly against the altar with the strength of ten men.

His father made a move to go to his aid, but powerful arms held his shoulders. In an instant the tip of the Executor's spear was at his throat. Ikai thought the pain would amputate his arm, but a moment later it disappeared completely. The pressure of the Executors on his body disappeared too. He opened his eyes and saw the Eye had taken a step back, as had the Executors. He looked at his left wrist and saw the four-finger-wide Ring, now golden, and in its center an Ox, the symbol of the farmers. Under the ring the flesh of his wrist, forearm and hand was blackened, like a branch charred by fire.

"Ikai, through the Ritual of Trades, you are now a Farmer for the rest of your days," Proxy Kulban proclaimed. The Priest began to give thanks to the Gods with his arms outstretched towards the temple.

"Come, son," Siul said.

Ikai leapt from the altar as if he had been lying on a bed of nettles. His father took him away while the next unfortunate, Gilma, the Baker's son, approached the altar with his father to undergo the same ritual.

"Did I do well, Father?"

Siul smiled with sadness in his eyes. "Yes, my son, you did very well."

"Then, why are you sad? Aren't I a Farmer like you?"

"Yes, my son, but now you too are a slave, like me."

At the time he did not understand the meaning of his father's words. It was later on when he came to realize their importance fully. But the sadness in his father's voice as he spoke those words was etched on his brain as though by fire, like the damned Ring. Ikai had been a Farmer a great part of

his youth, until one day the Gods demanded a bigger Quota of Hunters in the Sixth County, and he was recruited by Sejof. Instead of a Farmer, he was now a Hunter. He looked at the Ring on his arm with the symbol of the Eagle and shook his head. The Gods chose the destiny of men; thus it was and thus it had been for more than a thousand years.

What Gedrel, that crazy old man, had said was nonsense. Ikai looked at the old man and came back to reality. It did not seem as if he would wake up again. The punishment had been too harsh. But he surprised him once more.

“Help me… to stand… please…” the old man asked him when he woke, as if he had been listening to him.

Ikai shook his head. This old man’s inner strength was amazing. He gave him a hand, and with a great effort Gedrel stood up.

The old man’s eyes fell on the scene of death around them.

“You fought well… very well…”

“I’m a Hunter, I’ve been trained for this.”

The old man looked at him intensely out of his good eye, as if trying to read his soul.

“There are Hunters and Hunters… what I’ve witnessed here today was something more than training and skill. You’ve killed four men with calculated coolness…” He looked at him again, more carefully, and nodded. “I’d say you were never even nervous… am I wrong?”

Ikai did not care for the old man’s scrutiny. “They attacked me and I defended myself. I was trained to fight and they weren’t. I’m alive and they’re dead. There’s nothing more to be said.”

“If you say so, young Hunter… but in the form… in the way of it I seemed to read something more… an extraordinary coolness and calculation…”

“If you’re suggesting that I’m a cold-blooded, calculating murderer, I can assure you you’re wrong.”

“Don’t get angry, my young savior, I didn’t mean to offend you. I think you’re a young man with a sharp calculating mind, to whom I owe my life and to whom I’m immensely grateful.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I’m a Hunter and they were Pariahs. It was my duty, my obligation.”

The old man nodded, but did not seem entirely convinced. “Take me… to my… nephews…” he pleaded.

Ikai helped him. He held him around the waist, passing the thin arm over his shoulder. The old man leaned on him and they made their way slowly on. Gedrel said his farewells to the fallen men with a strange prayer to various gods Ikai had never heard of.

“Will you bury them… so they won’t be eaten by the forest vermin?”

Ikai shook his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t do that. I must leave, I can’t waste any more time. I’ve been too long as it is.”

“I see… urgent business…”

Ikai nodded, expecting to be met with a look of reproach or disapproval, but there was only that same glint of intelligence.

“What about me, could you take me with you?”

Ikai looked around. “And your mounts?”

Gedrel made an odd grimace which Ikai interpreted as one of sarcasm. “We’re a humble family of merchants… we barely make ends meet… I have no mount.”

Ikai swore to himself. If he left him there the probability was that he would not survive. He was too far from the nearest village.

“I can’t ask more of you than you’ve done already…”

Ikai weighed up the alternatives. He knew the best and most rational option would be to leave the old man there, since he meant nothing to him and he had already helped him enough. Kyra was in danger, at the hands of the Enforcers of the Gods. He had to go on. But if he left the old man there he would die. He heaved a sigh. “Come on, you can ride with me,” he said reluctantly. “We’ll find help along the way somewhere.”

“Thank you, my son. Someday our paths will cross again and it’ll be the other way around. I’ll remember it.”

“Let’s hope that day never comes,” Ikai said with a half-smile.

It’s more likely that one day my eyes will see the sea than that this poor old man will save me, he thought. He spurred his horse and went on towards the capital, to the Dungeons of Oblivion.

8

Kyra opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling of the room. It was round and silver, like a great mirror, but she could not see her reflection in it. She was lying on the floor, also silver, and she could feel the cold on her skin through the white robe she was wearing. She did not know where she was. She tried to remember what had happened and a terrible headache hit her repeatedly like the hammer on the anvil at a smithy. She put her hands to her head but could not assuage the throbbing.

To her right she saw Yosane lying unconscious. Kyra got to her feet. She felt faint and dizzy, but refused to yield to weakness, she went across to her friend and fell on her knees beside her.

“Wake up, Yosane, wake up,” she called. Half closing her eyes, she tried to pierce the gloom which surrounded them, searching for any indication of danger. Everything was semi-darkness and silence. On the floor she could make out more bodies, motionless. Her friend did not stir and Kyra started to feel anxious. She grabbed her by the shoulders and began to shake her.

“Come on, wake up, don’t do this to me!”

Yosane groaned, mumbled incoherently and opened her eyes.

Kyra sighed loudly in relief. “Are you all right? For a moment I thought…”

“I think so, yes,” Yosane said, trying to focus. “My head… where… what is this place…? How did we get here?”

“The damned Eye-of-the-God! That’s how we got here,” Kyra grumbled. She was trying to remember with her eyes closed. “I seem to remember something… they brought us into his presence and… and… I don’t remember anything else. Damn!”

Yosane got to her feet with difficulty. “Look Kyra, we’re not alone!”

“Yes, I saw them when I was on my way to you.”

Lying on the floor were a dozen young women, some still unconscious, others trying to stand. They were all dressed alike: a long white robe with

silver embroidery on neckline and sleeves, and a strange rune on the front.

Kyra looked at Yosane and then at herself. “They’ve dressed us all the same!”

Yes… it looks… we look…”

“Say it, come on, say it,” Kyra pressed her.

“We… we look like… maids to be sacrificed… in some sort of… ritual… to some God…”

“Exactly!” Kyra clenched her fists in anger. “Well, they’re not sacrificing me! I swear I won’t be sacrificed in the name of anybody! I’ll fight, I’ll tear their guts out!”

Yosane shook her head. Her shoulders drooped. “Calm down, please, Kyra,” she said heavily. “Let’s help them.”

The two girls helped the closest prisoners. Soon they all began to wake up and show signs of life. All had the same symptoms: dizziness, disorientation, strong headaches. Kyra counted twelve girls including herself, all of her own age, an odd coincidence. Surrounded by a growing murmur, a mixture of sobbing, unanswered questions and fear, Kyra noticed that there were three girls who had not managed to wake up. She went to them and discovered that the left side of their bodies was blackened. They were the three unfortunate girls from the punishment in the square, the ones who had been captured after fleeing the Summoning.

“Are they dead?” Yosane asked. There was fear in her eyes.

“I don’t think so,” Kyra said. She examined one of them. “Their breathing is very faint. I don’t understand much about this, but I think they’re alive, barely. And that charcoal color doesn’t look good.”

“Perhaps I can help,” one of the girls said as she came up to them.

“If you think you can, go ahead,” Kyra said, motioning with her hand.

The young woman nodded. Kyra watched her as she went by; she was somewhat shorter than herself. Bulging blue eyes in a very pale face full of freckles smiled at her as she passed. Kyra returned the smiling gaze. The girl crouched beside the nearest of the three unfortunate girls. She pushed away the black, very curly hair which fell to the girl’s shoulders and put her ear to her chest, which barely showed any rise and fall of breathing.

While the girl examined the other two, Kyra turned her attention on the chamber they were in, in search of some possible way out.

“The floor’s made of silver…” Yosane said. She was looking at it in puzzlement.

“So’s the ceiling,” Kyra said, pointing upwards, “and the chamber’s round. Look at those strange runes carved on the floor so that they make a circle all around. They give out a soft golden light which shines up to the ceiling… odd… But I can’t see any way out, the walls are black as a starless night and they make a perfect circle. So how did we get in, then?”

Yosane looked closely at Kyra, following her gaze. “Are you looking for some way out?”

“Yes,” Kyra replied concentrating. “Survive and escape. Always remember that.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to escape…” Yosane said fearfully, looking at the dark walls around them.

“Then we’ll concentrate on surviving until we can,” Kyra said with complete conviction, as if it were impossible that they should not succeed.

“I wish I had your conviction… and your courage…”

Kyra looked her in the eye and took her shoulders. “Survive and escape. That’s our life now, and that’s the law we have to follow. Don’t think about anything else. Nothing else matters. Otherwise you’ll die.”

“I don’t know if I can live by that rule, I’m not like you…”

“You’ll be able to, believe me. And if not, I’ll get behind you and push.”

Yosane smiled, a shy, grateful smile.

“Besides, Ikai will come for me. I’m absolutely sure of it. And he’s an excellent Hunter, he’ll find our trail no matter where they take us, no matter where they lock us up. He won’t stop till he finds me. So I’ll survive, there’s hope, we’ll escape, one way or another.”

Yosane nodded, a tiny spark of hope shining in her grey eyes.

“They’re alive, but if they don’t get attention I doubt they’ll last another day,” the young woman announced, looking at Kyra and Yosane.

“How do you know… and what’s your name?” Kyra asked.

“My name is Idana. And I know because I’m an Apothecary, like my father, my father’s father and his father before him. It’s my family’s trade. I’ve been learning it from my father ever since I was a child. That’s how we

make our living, serving the Gods. I can recognize many types of wounds and illnesses, and treat them."

Kyra's eyes looked for the Ring on the young woman's wrist. She saw the symbol of the Fox.

"Can you do anything for them?" Yosane asked.

"Without the ingredients to prepare an ointment to help fight and alleviate that dreadful burn, and without medicinal herbs against infection, I'm afraid not," she replied, showing her empty hands.

Kyra scanned the room with a glance, looking for some kind of container, something that might hold an ointment or a potion. But the cold chamber was empty, there was nothing in it at all. Only themselves. The sobbing, mumbling and conversations were growing in intensity among the prisoners, and this was beginning to irritate Kyra. She could not think with all the noise, and she needed to get out of there. *What would Ikai do in this situation? He always thinks of something, he has a cool, calculating mind. He's very smart. What would he do? What? Think!"* The noise around her became unbearable.

"Shut up! By all the damned Gods, shut up!" she shouted. The shout came out stronger than she had intended. Instantly, they all fell silent. There was not a sound. They barely allowed themselves to breathe. They looked at Kyra in fear and confusion. Yosane realized what was happening and intervened.

"Easy, girls, nothing's wrong. Let's be quiet for a while… please… Try to calm down and lower your voices… please," she pleaded, making soothing gestures with her hands.

But there was one girl who did not seem scared. She was tending to another, a very strong girl who had not yet recovered. She fixed her gaze on Kyra as if her eyes were two arrows of pure rage. Kyra noticed this, but brushed it aside and ignored her. *We must find a way out, perhaps there's a hidden spring. Something that opens a door in those walls,* she thought, and began to walk towards the closest wall. When she reached the circle formed by the unusual golden runes carved on the floor, she hesitated. *Survive and Escape,* she breathed to herself.

She took a step across the circle. A golden flash leapt from floor to ceiling. Something hit Kyra forcefully. She fell backwards.

"Kyra!" Yosane cried, and ran to help her.

Kyra shook her head and stared at the barrier which rose from floor to ceiling, forming a wide circle, surrounding them all.

“Are you all right?” Yosane asked anxiously.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine… don’t worry. That thing came out from the circle on the floor, and it hit me when I tried to cross it.”

Idana came up to them and studied the phenomenon for a moment. “It seems to be a barrier. It looks translucent, although most likely it’s solid. It reminds me of... it’s like the Boundary. Very curious. I believe it’s there to stop us from crossing it…”

Kyra got to her feet. “Nothing’s going to stop me escaping,” she said with a frown. There was stubbornness in her voice. She went back to the barrier.

“Kyra, no!” Yosane cried. She reached out her arm to try and stop her. But she did not succeed. A tremendous shock ran through Kyra’s body when she tried to cross the barrier. She was thrown backwards as if she had been hit by lightning in a strong summer storm. Darkness swallowed her.

The world of dreams abducted her and took her on shadowy wings to an event which was distant but etched deeply in her memory. A face appeared before her amid the confused mist of dreams. She could not make it out, although it was vaguely familiar. She thought of her brother Ikai, but no, it was not him, though there was a likeness. It was Malte. When she recognized her childhood friend, a feeling of happiness enveloped her.

“Wake up, sleepyhead, they’re waiting for us in the village,” he said, looking in through the small window of Kyra’s room and showing his ivory teeth in that charming smile of his. It was nighttime and the stars were shining behind the boy’s curly, copper-colored hair.

“Cover your eyes while I change,” Kyra said, looking at his handsome black eyes.

“Why, is there anything to see?” Malte said, joking.

Kyra poked her tongue at him and swore to herself. Malte laughed and looked at the moon.

“Shhh, you’ll wake my mother!”

“All right, and where’s Ikai?”

“He left a few days ago, he’s on a Hunt…”

“I see… hurry up, I don’t want to be seen here.”

“Who’s going to see you? It’s nighttime and yours is the darkest, brownest skin of anyone I know. You certainly don’t look as though you’re from these parts…”

“Seeing that nobody’s been able to cross the Boundary in a thousand years, I’d say your theory is quite wrong,” he whispered.

Kyra finished dressing. “Nobody that we know of…” Kyra corrected him.

Malte nodded. “I won’t argue with you. Since you turned sixteen a week ago, your wisdom has gone through the roof.”

“You can tease all you like, but being eighteen doesn’t make you any smarter, just older.”

Malte laughed again and had to cover his mouth with his hands.

“If you wake up Solma we’ll have a problem!”

He nodded vigorously and said no more.

The two friends went out in haste to the village. Both wore dark robes and black cloaks, with hoods to hide their faces, like two fugitives in the night. Kyra had known Malte since they were little. He was the son of the poultry man and his father’s farm was close by, after the little brook and the bare hill. There had never been anything romantic between them, although they spent all the free time they had together. Not that Malte was not attractive; Kyra knew he was, and lots of the village girls chased after him. The reason was something very different: they had much more important things to think about than lovers’ games. They gambled with their lives.

When they reached the edge of the village, they made sure they were not being followed and turned east, to the meeting-point. That night the meeting would take place in Ulbes’ barn on the outskirts, near the forest. Each meeting took place in a different location, once every four weeks. Absolute precaution was necessary; Proxy Ambuk’s Guards were on the watch, the Hunters were always on patrol and besides, the most terrible of all, the Enforcers of the Gods, would kill all without a word if they found them. Meetings were forbidden, they went against the law.

When they arrived they waited a moment, hidden among the dry grass, before approaching the barn. Malte went first to check there was no danger, and after a moment beckoned her to follow. Milton the miller was on watch duty. They greeted him and went inside. A dozen people were waiting around a candle inside a pot. They were all dressed in the same way: their

heads and faces covered with dark hoods, in some cases even scarves, to avoid recognition. The dim light from the candle barely illuminated the unbroken darkness of the barn.

The meeting began. As usual, they brought each other up to date with the latest news about the Enforcers, the Proxy and the Guard. Tolsen the merchant, who had just come back from the capital, told them about Regent Sesmok and the fallacies of the High Priest Torkem. As in most of those secret meetings, they spoke vehemently against the slavery of the people, the hunger the Enforcers forced them to suffer in order to keep them subservient. They railed against the corruption and tyranny of the Regent, the High Priest and the Proxies, who did not serve the people but the Eyes-of-the-Gods, and whose sole objective was to keep the population oppressed while they lived in luxury.

Kyra knew all those raw, uncomfortable topics well, having heard them many times: painful things which she debated passionately and felt intimately, because of the injustice and the pain they caused to thousands and thousands. To the whole Senoca people.

“We must spread the message among the people,” said Elstor. “Little by little, so that those who believe there’s no hope for their children can know there actually is. I’ve seen the Bloody Hand in several places in the village. People are beginning to wonder what it means; we have to approach them, whisper a message of courage in their ears, a message of union. We have to light the spark of rebellion against the system, against the Golden Gods who have enslaved us for a thousand years.”

“We have to make the flame catch among our own people,” Malte said passionately, clenching his fist.

Kyra watched him spellbound. She knew the blood was hot in her friend’s veins.

“Today there are few of us, no more than a dozen in our village. But that doesn’t matter if we manage to plant the seed of hope. Tomorrow it’ll grow and there’ll soon be a hundred of us, then a thousand, and one day we’ll all be one. And we’ll rise to be free!”

“Yes!” Kyra cried, carried away by her feelings.

“No!” came a strident voice behind her. “That will never happen.”

Kyra turned. Her heart almost leapt out of her mouth. An Eye-of-the-Gods was at the door of the barn. With him was an Executor. In his hand,

Milton’s decapitated head. And everything was suddenly chaos.

“Flee!” Elstor yelled, and put out the candle. Desperate screams filled the barn, and darkness enveloped them.

Kyra had no idea what to do. The Eye and the Executors were guarding the entrance, but she could see nothing in the dark. Perhaps she could slip between them without being seen.

“Up!” said an urgent voice, and she recognized Malte’s.

The two of them went blindly towards the ladder. Malte bumped into a beam and grunted in pain. “It has to be here,” he said, sounding annoyed. They felt around and found it at last.

“Up, fast!” he urged her.

They climbed the wooden ladder as fast as they could in the darkness. They reached the upper level, which was full of hay. Kyra crawled to the great opening in the side wall and a trace of light fell on her. Screams of death and agony could be heard from the lower floor.

“Come on, climb down!” Malte urged her, and gave her the rope they used to pull up the bales of hay from outside. Without stopping to think, Kyra slid down, she misjudged the distance and hit the ground hard. She got up and saw Malte sliding down.

“Now, run to the river! Run!” Malte urged her.

Kyra turned and began to run with all the speed her legs were capable of. She knew the terrain and the farm well. Even in the dim light available she ran and leapt, avoiding obstacles in her desperation to escape the Executors and reach the river. Suddenly she heard a grunt behind her. She looked back. It was Malte. He had fallen. He was on the ground, on his side, a little way back. Kyra had not realized she had run so far ahead. She thought he had been right behind her. She was about to call out to him to hurry him up, but then she saw them: two Executors were approaching Malte, who was still lying on the ground. Kyra did not understand what was going on. Why did he not run? She threw herself in the tall grass to hide. Her heart was beating madly.

Come on, Malte, run! You’ve got to escape! But for some reason Malte was not moving. A terrible anguish overcame her, and she found it impossible to breathe. One of the Executors reached Malte and lifted him from the ground. And Kyra understood: he had a spear through his back. Kyra covered her mouth with her hands so as not to scream. *No, Malte, no!*

The Executor took a silver knife in the shape of a half-moon from his belt. The bloodthirsty eyes in his sinister helmet visor turned towards it. Tears of despair welled up in Kyra's eyes. Malte, still alive and proud, spat at the Executor. The knife slit the young man's throat.

Noooooooooooo! Kyra thought she would go mad with rage and pain. She closed her eyes and sank her face in the earth, choking off an outburst of uncontrollable sobbing. Her heart broke as if two horses had pulled it in opposite directions. She felt as though her soul was being torn out and an unbearable sorrow was gnawing at her. Lying flat on the grass, she heard the Executors walk away. She felt so miserable she thought she would die there and then.

And the darkness swallowed her up again, banishing the dreadful memory, enveloping her in the mist of dreams.

"Malte!" she called as she opened her eyes.

"Malte? Who's that?" Yosane asked, turning eyes sunken with worry on her.

"Where am I?" Kyra asked in confusion.

"We're prisoners. You tried to cross the barrier and you passed out from a violent shock."

"I wouldn't recommend you to try that again," Idana said as she examined her. "That shock nearly killed you."

"I'm fine… I was dreaming… remembering… Help me up."

Idana offered her hand and Kyra raised herself. She heaved a deep sigh. *I'm so sorry, Malte. It hurts so much… One day your dream will come true, I know it. You won't be here to see, and most likely I won't either, but one day we'll be one and free. I promise you. I'll never stop trying.*

She went up to the barrier in a fury. "Bloody, bloody pigs!" she yelled at the top of her voice.

Another of the prisoners got up and came towards her threateningly. "Be quiet and stay still! You'll get us all killed, you fool!"

Kyra looked at her through half-closed eyes. It was the one who had given her that black look before. Her hair was fair as the sun and her skin lightly tanned; her blue-grey eyes shone angrily. Kyra thought she was really pretty, which in their situation might not be such a good thing.

“You can do whatever you want, pretty girl, I’ll do whatever I have to do. I’m not staying locked up in here waiting to see what those beasts have in store for me.”

“What are they going to do with us?” another girl asked. Her hair was chestnut and the symbol on her Ring identified her as a Farmer.

“What do you think?” Kyra replied. “Look at you.” She pointed to her robe. The girl looked down at her new clothes, then sobbed and shrank into a ball.

“Don’t scare them, you don’t know why we were chosen by the Gods,” the blonde said, wagging an accusing finger at Kyra.

“What’s your name?” Kyra asked, trying to maintain a neutral tone even though she was barely able to contain her rage.

“My name is Lian, so remember that, Farmer,” she said condescendingly.

Kyra clenched her fists. “Let me tell you this, Lian, in case you don’t already know, when the Gods summon someone, it’s not for anything good…”

“And how do you know?” Lian said defiantly.

“I know that you never hear anything about them again…”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean that anything bad happens to them. High Priest Torkem told us we’d been chosen for a great end: to serve the Gods in their glory. A great purpose awaits us.”

“And you believe that string of lies?”

“Why should I believe you instead of the High Priest?”

“Because you’re supposed to think for yourself…”

“Are you saying I’m stupid?”

“Are you asking me?”

“I think I’ll have to teach you a little lesson in humility.”

“You?” Kyra laughed. “Whenever you want.”

“No, not me,” the blonde said. “Urda!” she called.

Another girl stood up slowly, and Kyra understood. She was huge; she looked as though she had swallowed another girl. She came up to them slowly with long steps, like a giant, and stood in front of Kyra. She was a head taller and twice as big, with dark brown eyes and a frowning gaze. She

looked more like a man than a woman, and to underline this she wore her fair hair closely cropped. But Kyra did not cower. Her brother had taught her to fight. She could defend herself, even against this behemoth.

“Let me introduce you to my dear friend Urda. They put us together the first day. We spent a week of isolation. In that time we got to know each other and she’s really charming. In fact we’ve become very good friends. Haven’t we, Urda?”

“Yes,” she replied, in a voice so deep it seemed to come from a cavern.

“And the funniest thing is that Urda and I are from the Third County —now isn’t that interesting? Well, there’s more: Urda belongs to the Guard of Urasis, the capital of the county. And guess who’s the daughter of the Proxy of Urasis?”

Kyra looked at her in disbelief.

“Exactly, yours truly. Isn’t life full of coincidences?”

Kyra half-closed her eyes. If she was with the Guard she would have been trained to fight…

“So I’m going to ask you one more time, you moron form the Sixth County, are you calling me stupid?”

Kyra looked at her full of a seething fury; she knew very well what was at stake there. All these women had been captive for days and knew that death was waiting in the wings. This was no simple spat but a fight for power. *If I back down, she’ll be the leader of the group. They’ll all follow her wishes. I can’t afford that. To escape I have to be the one at the head of these girls, or else my chances will be nil. I can’t back down, there’s too much at stake.*

She tightened her fists and looked at the other girl defiantly. Then she swung a right punch to her eye. Lian collapsed like a felled tree amid cries of disbelief.

“You’re going to regret that,” Urda threatened her.

Without waiting to be attacked, Kyra threw herself at Urda. She hit right and left with all her strength at the soldier’s massive body. But Urda stood up to the blows. There was more than fat under that robe. Kyra hit her again and met a backstroke of Urda’s, which she avoided by a hair’s-breadth.

“You know how to fight?” Urda said in surprise. “But you’re just a Farmer.”

“I’m not just any Farmer,” Kyra said and punched Urda’s stomach with two potent short hooks. One of them seemed to have some effect, as the soldier girl bent double and seemed to be having difficulty breathing. Kyra saw her chance and attacked. Urda took an unexpected step forward and caught her in a bear hug.

Oh no! Kyra moaned as her arms were pressed against her sides in Urda’s embrace so she was unable to free them. The soldier lifted her off the ground, and she found herself kicking the big girl’s body as she hung there like a puppet. She thumped her in the stomach with her knees, but her blows were barely hard enough and the brute was as strong as an ox. Kyra felt Urda crushing her with tremendous force. She could not breathe and the pain was killing her. She was going to break her spine!

“Give up and I’ll let you go,” Urda said grimly.

“I never give up,” Kyra said furiously through her teeth.

“Then I’ll snap you in two.”

Kyra felt that she was lost, but then she remembered something her brother had taught her. She threw her head back and with all her might brought her forehead down against the bridge of Urda’s nose. There was a loud *crack*. She let go of Kyra and clapped her hands to her nose. She was bleeding visibly, sniffing loudly and her eyes were streaming with tears.

“You broke it!” she grunted, first in surprise, then in rage. Blind with fury, she launched herself at Kyra and shoved her hard. Kyra tried to step aside, but there was no time. She was thrown backwards and struck the barrier with her back. A golden shock ran through her. The pain exploded throughout her body and she fell to the ground.

“Noooo, Kyra!” she heard Yosane shout.

Kyra tried to stay conscious. In front of her, on the black surface of the wall, she saw a golden circle begin to flash. The circle grew larger. It flashed three times, emitting an intense golden brilliance, and the rock in it vanished. An Eye-of-the-God entered the chamber, followed by two Executors.

“The door…” Kyra stammered. “I knew there was one somewhere…” and she smiled.

The Eye pointed at Kyra. “Bring her to me,” he ordered the Executors.

The Executors came in across the barrier. Amid scared whispers the prisoners moved away, all except Yosane and Idana, who stayed beside Kyra. The two Executors stared at her. She stared back at them with something like a smile of amusement; her mind was rambling.

“How do they cross?” she asked, more to herself than to the Executors.

“Be quiet, slave!” one of them said in a cavernous voice.

“Leave her!” Yosane said, trying to defend her friend.

A tremendous kick sent her rolling to the center of the chamber.

“Bastards…” Kyra managed to mutter, and fainted.

The Executors seized her legs and dragged her away.

They disappeared through the secret door.

9

Ikai arrived at a gallop at the gates of the great walled city. Osaen, the capital of the Senoca nation, welcomed him stoically and Ikai felt that same unease in the pit of his stomach he always felt when he looked at it. The previous morning he had left Gedrel with a healer in the village of Holsea and now he had finally been able to reach his destination.

The Regent's Guard stopped him at the gate. When they saw the Hunter symbol they let him in at once. He knew the city well, or at least the areas which were not forbidden. He led his mount to the eastern side of the great city. Sejof had taken him there to train him when he was twelve, and now it was where he lived. He went back to the farm whenever he could to see his mother and sister, but unfortunately it was not very often.

He rode as fast as the crowd allowed him through the cobbled streets of the residential area. He crossed the Merchants' Quarter with difficulty because of the number of merchants and customers desperately trying to make a living. The law of the Gods was the same for everyone, whether merchants or peasants: produce or die. Once he left them behind he reached the Craftsmen's Quarter, where he skillfully avoided stalls, master craftsmen, textile workshops, smithies and endless businesses devoted solely to the production of goods for the rulers and the Gods. Finally his destination appeared ahead: the Hunters' Quarter.

He spurred his horse and galloped into it, knowing that there the Hunters would avoid him easily. The Quarter was large, and housed all the Hunters of the Kingdom. They were divided into six different groups, each responsible for the wellbeing of one of the counties of the nation. They were led by the Lord Hunter Osvan, who controlled them with an iron hand. All owed absolute obeisance to the Regent Sesmok, even though many of the orders Osvan received came directly from the Enforcers of the Gods.

Ikai stopped his horse in front of the great landing of the Hunters of the Sixth County and jumped down. In the courtyard, several of his comrades were training. When they saw him arrive so urgently they stared at him in surprise, but Ikai did not stop to greet them and ran into the great wooden

building, looking for Sejof. He found him beside the fireplace, tending his weapons.

Ikai greeted him with a curt gesture. “Master.”

“Ikai, what a surprise! I’m glad to see you back and in one piece,” Sejof said. He left the sword and whetstone on the table, came to Ikai and put his weathered hands on the young man’s shoulders. “I gave you leave, why have you returned so soon? Your wounds can’t be healed yet, surely.”

“Master, something has happened and I need your help.”

Sejof saw how serious the matter was in Ikai’s eyes, and frowned. “Tell me what’s happened.”

Ikai told him the full story of what had happened to his mother and sister. The Master Hunter took a moment to digest the bad news. “I’m really sorry. I had heard a rumor, but I was hoping it wasn’t true.”

“I must find my sister, Master.”

Sejof shook his head. “You and I are Hunters, Ikai. We know the law of the Gods and their repercussions better than many. If a person is summoned by the Gods, that person must answer the call. If they flee, they send us to hunt them. If they give in, they’re taken by the Eyes. That’s the law, and there’s nothing that can be done about it. You know that as well as I do.”

“I need to find out what’s happened to her. Where have they taken her? Why?” Ikai sighed heavily. “What’s in store for her?”

“Those questions will only lead you to death. Listen to me well, boy, you must understand that your sister is gone, even though your heart breaks in the process. Accept it, or it’ll cost you your life.”

“I can’t. She’s my sister.”

“Nobody has ever managed to bring back a loved one, and anyone who’s tried has died in the attempt. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a poor peasant, a rich merchant, a powerful Proxy or the Regent himself. There’s nothing we can do, we’re all slaves in the eyes of the Gods, and anyone who goes against their desire is condemned to death. Either he’ll die fleeing from us or he’ll die at the hands of the Executors.”

“I don’t care about the Regent or the Enforcers of the Gods, I have to rescue Kyra and I will!”

“Be quiet, you fool!” The master cried, looking around him. “What you’re saying is crazy, and if anyone hears you it’ll cost you your life.”

“She’s my own blood. I won’t abandon her to her fate.”

Sejof seized Ikai’s shoulders and looked at him firmly in the eye, holding him fast. “You must forget about her. The Gods have her, and as far as you’re concerned that’s as if she were dead. If you don’t let her go and keep asking questions it’ll mean your end. Your days are numbered.”

“If I must die, let it be. But I won’t abandon my sister.”

“Fool!”

“Are you afraid of helping me, Master?”

Sejof took a step back. “Don’t be stupid, of course I’m afraid. Just for having this conversation they could cut both our heads off. But no, I don’t fear Regent Sesmok and his Guard. What I fear is what the Eyes and their bloody Executors might do to my family. Yes, Ikai, I fear for my own, and you’d do well to fear for your own life, and your mother’s.”

Ismes and Yestas walked into the room, and the welcoming smiles on their faces vanished when they realized something was wrong. Sejof looked at them for a moment. “Come over here!” he ordered. “Talk to him, make him come to his senses.” His finger jabbed at Ikai’s chest. The two young Hunters looked at their Master in confusion. “Don’t let him leave the precinct, I want him watched. It’s an order!” he cried, and left in a fury.

Dawn found Ikai lying on his cot, awake. He had barely slept. He got up and put on his Hunter’s gear. He glanced around him at the stone walls he knew so well and the beds where his comrades were sleeping, with the trunks where they kept their scanty belongings at the foot of them. The smell of breakfast which the cook was already preparing, as on every other morning, reached him: that dreadful grub which tasted awful but which satisfied body and spirit. He smiled. He had spent lots of time there, learning, training, surviving… He had never wished for that particular trade; he had accepted it because he needed to help his family survive, needed it for his mother who was ill. The job was dangerous, and most of the time it was despicable. But the pay was good and it allowed him to buy the medicine Solma needed. Even so, little by little he had formed a link of camaraderie and respect, of brotherhood, with his fellow Hunters: with Ismes, who slept on the cot next to his, with Yestas, who snored like a saw two beds away, and even with Master Sejof, whom he respected deeply. And now, if he were to continue in his endeavor, he would lose it all. He had not thought of that until he saw Sejof’s reaction, but now he was sure.

He found this deeply upsetting. *I don't want to cross the Master or my comrades, still less put them in danger because of me.*

He sheathed his sword and put the throwing dagger at the back of his leather belt. He was not proud of what he did as a Hunter, in fact he hated it, but he knew he had to swallow his pride and live with the shame. He had gotten used to feeling it, as he had with the fear and contempt the villagers showed him. It only hurt when Kyra reproached him. And then it hurt as much as if he were being burnt with a hot iron. But it had been his own choice and he did not regret it. He glanced to one side at those men he had shared so much with and felt a pang of sadness. But there was nothing he could do, because deep down he knew he was going ahead, whatever the consequences.

He sighed. Ambuk had already warned him not to tell Sejof, but he had to try, since the Master had been like a father to him. *It was a risk, but I thought the Master would help me somehow. I was so sure, but I was wrong, completely wrong.* He shook his head, feeling hurt. He finished gathering his belongings together and put them in the bag, which he then slung over his shoulder. He went out into the courtyard and breathed in the morning air. It was cool, and it had the effect of clearing his mind. He stretched his muscles. Looking up at the sky, he made his decision: he would go on with his mission.

"We can't let you leave."

Ikai turned to find Ismes and Yestas, dressed and armed.

"Last night we talked until the small hours of the morning, friends. You know the situation, I can't stay."

"We know it and we're sorry, we really are. But you must think it over, you have to stay," Yestas said.

"I can't, my friends."

"You know we'd help you if we could," Ismes said, "but orders are orders."

"You won't try to stop me by force?" Ikai said with disbelief.

The two young men tensed, and their hands went to their swords.

"That won't be necessary," came Sejof's authoritarian voice. The Master Hunter came to stand in front of Ikai. "Have you thought about your decision?" he asked, his dark eyes fixed on Ikai's.

“Yes, Master. I’m going after her.”

Saddened, Sejof let his head fall. “If you leave now I won’t be able to protect you. Because you’re refusing your duty, you won’t be a Hunter any more. You’ll be a Pariah. Do you understand that, Ikai? Do you understand what that means, and the consequences?”

Ikai swallowed. “I understand, Master.”

“And even so, you want to leave?”

“Yes, Master. My decision is firm.”

Sejof sighed long and deeply. “All right. I’ll give you three days before I report your absence. It’s as much as I can do. I can’t risk more.”

“Thank you, Master. I’m really grateful,” Ikai said, bowing his head in respect.

“May Oxatsi, Mother Sea, protect you! Pray and ask for her blessing so that our paths may never cross, because if they do…”

Ikai nodded, understanding the unspoken message, and turned to his comrades one last time. They raised their hands in farewell, their faces marked with deep concern. He left, leaving behind the life he had known, to become a Pariah, an outlaw. To become what he had been hunting until that very day.

With the night as an ally, enveloped in the shadows, Ikai moved stealthily with his back to a high rock wall. He wore dark clothes covered with a black woolen cloak, with a hood of the same color. He was in the section of the city furthest to the north, beyond the Regent’s palace and the rich buildings beside it. On the other side of the wall the forbidden quarter began. No one, with the exception of the Eyes-of-the-Gods and the Executors, had access to that part of the city, not even Sesmok himself. But the district was closely watched by the Regent’s Guard, as if some crazy fool would dare to disobey the law of the Gods.

But that was precisely what Ikai was on the point of doing. He remembered what Proxy Ambuk had told him about the Dungeons of Oblivion. There must be an entrance nearby. He went on carefully, trying not to be found out, like a stealthy thief in the night. He felt out of his own

element; he was used to following a trail, not to staying hidden. Much to his chagrin, this was going to be his life from now on. He had three days and he had to take advantage of them, because after this they would be after him. He shook his head and frowned. *Let them come! I won't make it easy for them.*

He hunched his shoulders, bowed his head and walked close to the wall. He turned at the first corner and saw them. His heart nearly burst; he stood still, silently watching the two Executors on guard in front of the tall metal gate. He stepped back, slowly, and let the wall hide him. It was the entrance to the complex, the point he was looking for. He retreated a few steps more to be sure they could not hear him and began to unravel a rope he had been carrying coiled around his body. He crouched and tied the hook to one end. He calculated the distance it needed to clear the wall. Then he looked to his left, where the Guard was moving away with measured steps. He had exactly a hundred paces of time: he had studied the patrol routine and calculated the best moment to try his risky move. If one of them turned now, he would be found. But Ikai knew it was a calculated risk he had to take.

He breathed in the cool night air and very carefully launched the hook with the rope. The noise of metal scraping the stone sounded like thunder in the quiet of the night, although it could not have been heard more than a few steps away. Ikai looked both ways restlessly, expecting to see the Executors appear or one of the Guards to turn back. But nobody had heard. He yanked the rope a couple of times to check that it was firmly anchored and took a deep breath. *The moment has come, there's no way back. On, for Kyra.* He summoned up his courage and began to climb.

He went down the other side and moved into the shadows of the forbidden quarter. He tried to make out anything distinctive which might indicate the entrance to the dungeons. He went on, hiding among hedges and trees, and realized that he was in a large garden. He could not see much, for only the faint light of the moon in a cloudy sky illuminated the area. Using his training as a Hunter and his years of experience following trails through fields and forests, he went on until he reached a group of buildings which appeared to be huge warehouses.

Like a predator camouflaged from its prey he waited, lying among the shadows, until the two Executors on duty passed. He sighed with relief

when he realized he had not been found out. He stood up, checked one of the windows of the first building and saw that he could force it open with his dagger. With the stealth of a snake he crawled inside. He inspected the surroundings and saw with surprise that it was really an enormous store filled with barrels and bundles. With extreme care he risked going on to the second building, avoiding another couple of Executors doing their round. He found a warehouse filled with sacks. He bent over one of them and opened it with his dagger: grain. He checked the next with the same result. The whole warehouse was filled with grain. The people were dying of hunger and accumulated here were all the wheat, oats, and cereal which had been taken from them. *Bastards!*

A sound. At his back. He turned, dagger at the ready. A pair of eyes shone in the dark. He had been discovered. He tensed, ready to fight. He would die in the act of killing. He was greeted by a *meow*. Ikai sighed with relief. It was a cat. Wherever there was cereal, there were mice, and where there were mice, there would be cats… He recovered from his fright and went out by the window. He checked another five giant buildings like the one he had just left, wondering what goods would be stored there. Everything obtained with the sweat and blood of the people. *The bastards!*

And suddenly he saw light. He moved closer, very slowly. Several torches and oil lamps illuminated a large square surrounded by buildings whose façades looked as though they were pure gold, marked with strange runes. In the middle of the square he saw four Eyes-of-the-Gods in their silver tunics hemmed with gold. They were standing beside a silver sphere covered with the strange symbol-language of the Gods, leaning on a black marble stand.

Ikai threw himself on the ground and watched from behind a clump of bushes. They seemed to be arguing about something. Suddenly a fifth Eye came out of a round building at the far end, like the temple but far bigger. Behind him walked half a dozen Executors forming a row. Two Executors brought up the rear, dragging one man between them.

The Enforcers of the Gods left the man they were dragging in the middle of the five Eyes, who were standing in a circle. The man remained on his knees, and his wailing filled the night. He was pleading amid sobs that they would not hurt him anymore. By his appearance and the blood on his face, it was obvious that he had been tortured. The Eyes-of-the-Gods

began a sinister chant, which froze the blood in Ikai's veins. One of them made a gesture with his hand, and the poor unfortunate was put into the sphere while the others raised their arms to the sky. The sphere began to rotate on the stand with a long deep buzzing. The prisoner began to convulse violently and the five waited for a moment, as if expecting something to happen, until the poor wretch died with a horrifying scream.

The Eyes turned and went into one of the buildings. The Executors left the area in pairs, in different directions. Ikai had to roll and crawl along the ground to avoid being discovered. His years as a Hunter served him well; he anticipated the Enforcers' movements by listening to the slightest sound, and his stealth kept him hidden. When the last Executors left, taking the body to the main entrance of the complex, an idea began to form in his mind.

Where there's one prisoner, there'll be more. And as he thought that he crawled to the building they had taken the poor man out of, glancing from side to side and hoping he would not be seen. All his senses were alert. He reached the entrance and saw that it had no door, only a circular opening in the wall. But it was guarded by an Executor.

I can't confront him, he'd call for help after he'd pulled my head off. What can I do to distract him? Think… think… Ikai closed his eyes and concentrated. He needed an idea, a good idea, or he would never manage to get inside. An all of a sudden one came to his mind. *It'll work, it has to work,* he thought, and retraced his steps back into the shadows of the night the way he had come. It did not take him long to return.

"Come on, don't fail me," he whispered, and freed what he was carrying under his cloak. At the same time he kept an eye on the Executor in front of the entrance. *Let's see if what they say about them is true.* Ikai watched closely. A shadow passed in front of the Executor.

"Damned cat!" brayed the Enforcer. Immediately he tried to hit the cat. The animal leapt toward the sphere and the Executor went after it with the intention of skewering it with his spear. Ikai took advantage of the situation, and with the swiftness and stealth of a fox he ran into the building. *It's true, they hate animals. That would explain why the Enforcers don't ride. They always use chariots.* He smiled and looked for a door. He did not find one, but what he found in its stead was a trap door in the floor in the middle of the room. Without thinking twice, he went down it. Under his feet he found

stone steps carved out of the rock itself. He went on down carefully while his eyes adjusted themselves to the darkness. A faint golden light seemed to issue from strange runes carved along the wall on his right. He was going deeper into an underground cave. An icy shiver ran down his back. He went on along the narrow corridor, crouching, trying not to make the slightest noise. There would certainly be guards down there.

A little further down he glimpsed light, and his spirits rose. He reached it and found himself in a round room. The floor was silver. Surprised, Ikai bent over to touch it with his hand, since it looked like pure molten silver. A golden circle of strange symbols ran around it. He looked up at the ceiling, and not more than nine feet above he saw an identical surface. It looked like a mirror reflecting the floor, except for the fact that he did not appear in it. Three tunnels set off from here in different directions.

He stood contemplating them thoughtfully, deciding which one to follow. He took a moment to calculate the options the way he liked to, and at last decided on the furthest to the right. If he had calculated correctly, it pointed north and he guessed the dungeons would be in the deepest, furthest part: to the north. He unsheathed his sword with his right hand and his throwing dagger with his left. *Kyra's here, very close. I'm going to find her.* He went on into the tunnel with determination. He walked for some time; the corridors grew longer and gloomier. A dark silence hung over that place, which seemed to conceal some lurking danger. Ikai's hands were sweating. He crossed another round room whose floor and ceiling were silver, and once again chose the tunnel to the far right. *I hope I'm not making the wrong choices, or else I'll end up at the bottom of an abyss.*

He was getting ready to enter the tunnel when he heard a sound nearby. He tensed. It was coming from the tunnel to his left. Someone was coming. This convinced him. He went into the right hand tunnel, walking fast and looking back every few steps to check whether he was being followed. At the end of an interminable corridor he saw light and stopped so he would not reveal himself. He permitted himself a single brief glance. He was left speechless. These were the dungeons. The room was very similar to the ones he had left behind, round and with silver floor and dome. But in this one, forming a perfect circle, were a dozen strange black spheres. They had bars at the front and were solid at the back. Inside each one there was… a person.

Ikai was getting over the shock, trying to make sense of this place, when he heard a noise behind him. It was faint, like the swishing of a cloak and muffled footsteps. Someone was coming. He had to move, and he could only go forward. He glanced at the dungeon again. The threatening shadow of a rhomboid head was projected on the wall. Ikai nearly dropped his dagger, startled. With eyes wide as saucers he saw an Executor coming into the room. At once he flattened himself against the tunnel wall. The Executor could not see him among the shadows. The sound at his back was coming closer. *I can't stay here. They're going to discover me!*

He heard a despairing moan and risked a lightning glance. The Executor had opened one of the spherical cages. He yanked a prisoner out and dragged him by the ankle as if he were no more than a puppet. Ikai watched in astonishment. The strength of those hulks was limitless. He had heard stories… and more and more he was beginning to believe them. He looked back, but could see nobody in the faint light of the tunnel behind him. And yet he could hear fresh reverberations of that sound. Someone was coming. He had no choice; he had to risk it. And he walked out into the revealing light of the chamber.

He crouched behind one of the cages. His heart was racing. The back of the Executor, covered by the long red cape, was still in full view. For a single moment Ikai stopped breathing, fearing he would be heard. The Enforcer of the Gods disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel on the other side of the dungeon. Ikai exhaled with relief. But it was a short-lived consolation, as he knew he only had a moment before the next danger appeared behind him. *I must take advantage of the few moments I have left and find Kyra.*

He left his hiding-place and faced the front of the sphere. Between the convex bars he saw a young man, somewhat older than he was himself. He was shaking, huddled in a fetal position, and ugly bruises marked both his legs. His color was not good.

"Listen," Ikai called out in a whisper.

But the man did not want to look. Fear had him in its thrall.

"Come on, look at me, I'm not one of them."

The man shook his head and crouched further against the back of the sphere. Ikai swore to himself. He went to the next sphere and tried again. There was the same result.

“Hell!” he said under his breath. His time was up. He was on the point of being discovered. He swept the spheres with a glance in search of someone who might help him. All refused to look at him and hid further inside, possessed by terror. All except one. A woman met his gaze. Ikai went quickly over to her. She must have been about forty, and her face and neck were marked by torture.

“Kyra, do you know a girl called Kyra?” he asked, clutching the bars.

The woman looked at him with sunken eyes and shook her head.

“She’s seventeen, her hair and eyes are like fire. Her spirit’s a volcano.”

He got the same negative reply. Ikai tried to open the bars of the sphere, pulling with all his might, but was unable to.

“You… won’t be… able…”

Ikai tried again, but had to give up.

“I wouldn’t go very far… anyway…” she said, gesturing at her withered legs.

“I’m looking for my sister, she was Summoned with others. Haven’t you seen them?”

The woman swallowed and nodded. “Yes… They were in the deepest blocks.”

“They *were*?”

“Yes, they’ve been taken away... They passed by here on their way out.”

“Are you sure?”

The woman nodded again and lowered her eyes.

“When was that?”

“A little while ago… I couldn’t say how long… it’s hard to tell time here…”

“Do you know where they’ve been taken?”

The woman looked at Ikai. In her eyes was a dark well of sadness.

“I don’t know where they took them. Out of here, I think…”

“Out of here? How do you know?”

“They took them in the same direction you’ve come from, that’s where the way out is, that I do know… Down the other end, down that tunnel, the

dungeon blocks continue," she said, pointing towards where the Executor had gone. "The deeper they are, the worse the punishment. Nobody ever comes back from the deepest dungeons…"

"Were they… were they all right when they came past?"

"They were better than us… that's for sure…"

Ikai examined her. She was covered in bruises and sores. She had been severely beaten, and her legs had taken the worst punishment. He clenched his fists on the bars and tugged, in the grip of a terrible rage and impotence.

"How can I help you?" he asked her when his strength was exhausted.

"Get out of here alive… and don't forget what you've seen… there are many of us in here… suffering, every day, waiting for the end in a long agony that never ceases… many…"

Ikai stroked her face, smeared with dried blood, and smiled kindly at her. Then he took both her hands and kissed them lightly.

"I won't forget you and I promise I'll tell, you have my word."

The woman smiled at him.

"What's your name?"

"Ikai, my name is Ikai."

"Go now, Ikai, and tell our people that you met Mada in the Dungeons of Oblivion, and that there are many like her down here, suffering a terrible fate, forgotten by all."

Ikai nodded. A sound reached his trained ear. He looked towards the mouth of the tunnel. A figure wrapped in a black hooded cloak was watching him. In his hand was a short bow.

"Damnation!"

Ikai turned into the tunnel on his right and began to run.

10

Kyra writhed and kicked with all her might, but it was useless. She could not break free. She was on a hard surface, tied down by her waist, feet and hands. She stopped trying to get free and tried instead to see what was around her. Nothing. There was total darkness. She sniffed like a dog and a familiar smell came to her nostrils: sulfur. *There are Enforcers here.*

She calmed down and waited, listening carefully, but there was not even the sound of the monsters breathing. Suddenly she heard footsteps, and there was light. Kyra strained her neck to look around. She was in a triangular chamber with black alabaster walls, and in each corner was an Executor on guard, armed with a spear. In the center of each wall a torch was hanging, lighting up the hall with a dancing flame. In the center of the chamber beside her she saw the three horribly burnt girls. Kyra stretched her neck to see them better. They were not moving. They must already be dead. They were held down like her, lying on slabs of polished red marble. Kyra's instinct screamed at her desperately: *Sacrificial altars*!

She twisted her neck and saw the same red marble under her own arm. She started cursing to herself. *They're going to sacrifice me!* With a soft buzz, a round door opened at the end of the chamber, moving to the top of the wall and disappearing into it. Kyra's mouth dropped, but before she could guess how an enormous golden door could possibly rise by itself, an Eye-of-the-Gods emerged through it from the darkness. When she saw him Kyra felt an icy chill, as if an icicle were sliding down her back.

The Eye came up to her and stood beside her without making any noticeable sound. The sinister helmet bent over Kyra's face. Fear clamped her stomach, but her terror allowed her to find strength.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she shouted furiously, struggling against her own fear.

The Enforcer of the Gods stared at her for a moment, erect and defiant. He took a ceremonial dagger from his belt, with strange runes carved on its

sharp edge. Terror made Kyra lose her voice. *I'm going to die!* she thought, and she was so sure of it that she was unable to scream.

The bony hand of the Enforcer held Kyra's forehead firmly, pushing her head down against the cold marble. She tried to struggle, but it was useless. She stared at the brownish ochre of the horrible creature's skin, the swollen black veins, the smell of sulfur coming from him, and her stomach turned. The dagger passed before her eyes, and on contact with a beam of light from one of the torches it gave out a flash which dazzled her. She closed her eyes. *He's going to cut my throat!* Terror weighed on her chest so heavily that she could not breathe.

The intense pain of a deep cut on her forearm clouded her mind. Kyra opened her eyes wide and glanced down at the unexpected source of pain. Just above the Ring was a bleeding cut. Kyra tried to get free again, using all her anger, twisting her body under the ligatures. The Eye held her neck with one hand and pressed hard. Air stopped reaching her lungs. He was strangling her! She tried to breathe through her nose, but the air was not coming in. And she stopped struggling.

After a moment, the Enforcer released the pressure and she was able to breathe again.

"Stay still, slave!" he ordered in that strident voice which hurt her ears.

Kyra did not move another muscle; slowly she filled her lungs with the precious air and focused on a single thing: survival. The Eye brought out a crystal disc, the size of an apple, and placed it over the blood flowing from her wound. It was flat and perfectly circular. Inside, in its very center, was a tiny nugget of gold. Kyra eyed the strange object fearfully. On contact with her blood the disc emitted a long golden flash which spread across the walls of the chamber. Kyra's heart skipped a beat.

"Surprising… very surprising," murmured the Enforcer. He raised the strange disc and studied it carefully.

He placed it back over the wound, and something truly unusual and worrying began to happen before her astonished eyes: the disc began to show an infinity of intricate veins around the golden pebble, which slowly turned red as it absorbed blood from the cut. The blood flowed from Kyra's body into the interior of the disc, filling and coloring the thousands of crystalline veins.

What the hell…! What's this? It's drinking my blood! She was so frightened and confused that she could not respond in any way. The Enforcer removed the disc, which by now had turned completely red. Kyra felt weak and a little dizzy. She thought it might be because of the amount of blood she had lost, but it had not been very much. She had lost blood before, from cuts and falls, much more than now. No, there was something more that had been extracted from her body… her own energy? This left her baffled. What was going on? What did this monster want from her? What had he done to her?

The Eye ignored her completely. He turned round and carefully stowed the disc away in his wide black sash. Slowly he went up to the first of the three women on the marble altars and placed his hands on either side of her head. He pressed hard. There was a tiny, almost metallic sound, like two swords clashing in combat. The Eye took away his hands and stepped back from the altar.

Kyra eyed him in puzzlement. What was he doing? A whitish light began to issue from the altar. After a few moments the altar began to change color until at last it had turned completely silver. It now shed a silver light of absolute purity, so that it hurt to look at it. It bathed the girl's body, as if it were passing straight through flesh and bone. While the light still bathed the first girl, the Eye went up to the other two and repeated the process. Kyra did not understand what was happening, but her instinct told her the three girls were being purged in some way, for some macabre purpose. *Why do it if they're already dead?* The silver light stopped radiating at last. Kyra blinked hard to accustom her eyes to the brightness.

"Noooooooo!" came a scream.

Kyra turned to her right and saw the girl beside her: eyes wide as saucers, mouth hanging loose. Kyra's heart was beating furiously. The girl had woken up. She was not dead! But not only that—her blackened left side was normal again. Kyra stared in astonishment. There came a second scream, then a third. The two other prisoners were waking up. The Eye went up to them and examined them carefully. He brought out a book bound in silver and seemed to note down something in it with his bony index finger. When he was satisfied he left the chamber in silence. Kyra watched him go, then looked at the three girls, who seemed to be waking from a gruesome nightmare. What on earth had happened there? What had

the henchman of the Gods done with them? What were they wanted for? Her gaze lingered on the three Executors guarding the chamber like stone custodians, and she knew she would get no answers that day.

Idana was asleep beside Yosane when the Executors burst into the prison-chamber. She woke up, anxiety clamping her chest. She stood up and looked at Yosane. The girl's face gaped in surprise and fear. Idana spread her arms and Yosane sought the warmth of her hug.

"What will they do to us?" Yosane asked. She was eying the Enforcers fearfully.

Idana felt the girl trembling like a leaf in her arms and tried to encourage her. "I don't know, keep strong."

"And Kyra?" she asked, looking around.

"They haven't brought her back… it's been almost three days…"

The Executors crossed the barrier which kept them captive and came in for them. All were taken amid shoves and blows. Idana felt as though they were cattle being taken to slaughter. The labyrinth of tunnels and underground chambers they were made to stagger through was so vast it was impossible to know which direction they were going in. The light of day blinded Idana as soon as she set foot on the long grass and left behind the hatch which closed the exit chamber. She covered her eyes and for a moment felt stunned. Everything around her was dazzlingly bright, and she could feel the soft grass under her feet. The rustic scent of the fields suddenly filled her nostrils, and she was deafened by a horse's neigh very close by. Her senses were hit, sharply and unexpectedly. For a long time they had known only shadows and darkness, damp and rancid smells, cold, hard floors, and the cruel silence of suppressed crying.

Idana waited for her senses to grow accustomed to her new environment and at last dared open her eyes. What she saw left her both surprised and stunned. Before her lay a wide plain covered with grass and wild plants, with a forest of elm trees to the left and a dirt path to the right. Half a dozen carts, pulled by heavy horses, formed a line on the path. The carts were large and sturdy, and the back of each consisted of a rectangular cage with black bars. Sitting at the front of each cart and holding the reins were two Executors. Idana stared at them, and her spirits wilted like a wild

flower without water. At the head of the line of carts was a different one, smaller, lower and semi-circular, with an open back. It was golden, and an Eye-of-the-Gods was standing on it. A hand clutched Idana's arm.

"It's a slave caravan!" Yosane said under her breath.

"To the carts!" came the strident voice of the Eye.

A murmur of mingled fear and sobbing rose in the clearing. The prisoners eyed each other fearfully, their hopes dashed by the prospect before them.

"Come on, quickly!" the Eye shouted impatiently.

The Executors around them started to push them towards one of the carts, using their spears without any restraint. Idana felt a blow on her back and began to stumble. Yosane hastened to her side and took her hand, and Idana smiled gratefully at her. When she saw the fear in her friend's eyes she realized how scared she was herself. Idana was deeply grateful for Yosane's support, since no matter how scared she might be, it helped her to dispel her own growing fears. They were herded on to the last cart, and Idana made herself as comfortable as she could against the bars. Yosane sat down next to her in silence, and they all waited. Idana had no idea what gave her that impression, but she sensed that the atmosphere was getting tenser.

"Look!" Yosane cried suddenly, her voice excited.

Idana followed her pointing finger and saw three girls coming through the hatch. They were the wounded girls, the ones she had examined, and yet they appeared to be fully recovered now. She was flabbergasted. They were walking toward the last cart, guided by an Eye.

"Kyra!" Yosane shouted, waving her hand through the bars.

Idana saw Kyra come out, escorted by two Executors. She looked well and was walking very erect, looking defiant. She saw them and nodded. A tiny smile appeared on her face and she winked at them. One of the Executors saw it and hit her.

"Don't hit her, please!" Yosane begged.

In response they hit Kyra again. Yosane fell silent. A tear slid down her cheek and her hands tugged impotently at the bars. Kyra was put on the last cart with the other three girls.

“You’d better not say another word,” came Lian’s voice from the cart in front. Her domineering voice and blonde hair were unmistakable. Beside her was Urda, together with two other girls who now followed her everywhere, alert to everything she said, as if they were her servants. Yosane stared at her.

“That one’s going to get us into a mess, and we won’t get out of it alive,” Lian commented.

“Let her be,” Yosane defended her.

“Tell your friend not to try anything or I swear Urda will pull her head off.”

“Mind your own business!” Idana said.

Lian waved a finger threateningly at her. “That’s what I’m doing, apothecary. Keep her quiet as a lamb.”

“Quiet, all of you!” the Eye ordered them. There was silence immediately. The Executors checked the locks of the cages.

“All ready,” said the Eye at the end of the group.

“Let’s go!” replied the Eye in the leading cart, and spurred the horses. The golden cart set off, and behind them the prison-carts. The caravan was on its way.

They went on for days, crossing plains and forests, following a vaguely visible path amid the vegetation. Yosane had confirmed this to her.

“We’re going north-east all the time,” she had said on the second day.

“How do you know?”

Yosane pointed upwards. “By the sun, but mostly by the stars. My father taught me to read the night sky and find my way by the stars. I’m not very brave, or determined, I know” —she glanced down— “but I have a quick mind and a good memory. My father even says it’s excellent, but I don’t believe it. He’s my father after all and I’m his only child, so what else would he say…?”

Idana had smiled and stroked her arm to cheer her up a little, because it was a terrible situation to be in whether your heart was brave or not. She watched her clever companion, swaying at her side with the movement of

the cart. She had already noticed that the girl was bright. Idana had always wanted to have a sister, someone she could lean on, someone to share joys and sorrows with. Watching Yosane, she felt the same feeling again. Idana was an only child; her home had not been blessed with a large family and on top of that she had lost her mother at an early age.

She remembered it well; it had been a few days before her tenth birthday, so that the date for her was forever a day of mourning. The terrible sadness it had left her with, the feeling of loss and impotence, her poor father's grief: all these had left a mark burned on her heart forever. The poor woman had been sick for three seasons, fighting to survive, fighting not to have to abandon her and her father. She had fought to the end of her strength, every day, against the fever which was slowly consuming her. Her father, an honest, dedicated apothecary, had pawned everything he had to pay the surgeons, and nearly lost it all. But they had not been able to do anything more than prolong the agony, until at last the fever took her. Idana had been by her side up to the last moment.

She could still feel the touch of her withered hand at the moment of her final farewell. Idana had cried inconsolably for days. She understood that her father's medicines had not been able to cure her, for many people were dying of the same illness in the city and it was spreading throughout the county. What she could not understand was why the surgeons had not been able to cure her. That was their job; they were not limited like her own father, who was a simple apothecary. Surgeons studied the body, they knew about illnesses and how to treat them. Why had they not been able to stop this plague that had taken so many lives? If she had been a surgeon herself, if she had had the chance, she would have saved them. Since that fateful day all she wanted was to become a surgeon, so that she might be able to save lives, like that of her poor mother.

"Idana… you're very quiet, what are you thinking about?" Yosane asked her.

"I was thinking about my mother… about how she died when I was a little girl and there was nothing we could do to save her. I was thinking I would give my soul for the chance to become a surgeon… to get hold of the knowledge to save helpless people."

Yosane gazed at her thoughtfully. "I understand. Only the most privileged families have access to that position…"

Idana nodded and swallowed with difficulty.

“An apothecary is a very good profession. Well respected. It’s really you who heal people, not the surgeons. They only look after the wealthy. You’re doing good and healing people.”

“Thank you, Yosane. But a surgeon’s knowledge is much more advanced, and it lets them heal wounds and illnesses that an apothecary can only dream of curing. Many’s the time my father has had to give up in the face of problems a surgeon would have been able to deal with.”

“And how many more has he helped when a surgeon would have thought it beneath him? Hundreds? Thousands in the course of his life, I’m sure. You should think about all the good you actually do instead of what you might be able to do, in my humble opinion…”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m happy to be able to help others, to be following my father’s wishes, because he always wanted me to learn his trade. Happy to have spent all these years beside him, because he’s a good, compassionate man. We’ve been together, loving and supporting each other. I couldn’t be happier in that sense. I know it’s a respectable profession, and we’ve never gone hungry, because people always need treatment. But when my mother died a little seed was planted inside me, deep down, and it’s grown with time, a desire that will never come true: becoming a great surgeon and being able to cure what neither an apothecary nor an experienced surgeon can.”

“That’s a very laudable wish. Maybe one day it will come true.”

Idana smiled resignedly. “Look where we are…”

Yosane lowered her eyes. “We’ll survive…”

On the morning of the twentieth day the caravan stopped. Idana got to her feet in puzzlement. They had barely stopped since the beginning of the journey, and never during the day. They only rested at night. Those damned Enforcers treated them as if they were wild animals, throwing them dried meat and dry bread without breaking the journey. The water was rationed and given to them at dawn and sunset, before they set off and when they

stopped. They spent the whole day caged, never knowing when they would be let out to stretch their legs, since that happened very seldom.

They were made to get down from the carts. Idana was surprised. What was going on? This was not normal. She looked around, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. They were in the middle of a plain, and a little way ahead was a forest of huge beech trees and thick vegetation.

Suddenly one of the girls ran towards the forest. It was one of the three with Kyra.

“Stupid slave!” cried the Eye-of-the-God in his penetrating voice.

The young girl was running with all her might, her legs flying over the grass. Idana looked at the Executors, but none of them made any move to go after her. How strange… Idana’s eye caught a reflection. In front of the girl, on the ground. Idana could make out a golden line, almost transparent. With each stride of the fugitive it was turning more solid. Idana realized what it was. She had to try to help her.

“Stop! It’s the Boundary! Stop!” she shouted. But it was too late. In full flight the girl glanced at her arm, where her Ring was vibrating wildly in warning, but ignored it and did not stop. With a terrible impact she hit the translucent barrier. There came a thunderclap, as if the sky had cracked in two, and the girl fell to the ground, swallowed up in an intense golden flash. Amid cries of surprise and muffled shouts of fear, the prisoners covered their eyes to hide from the dazzling light. Idana half-closed her eyes to look at the poor girl on the ground. She looked dead. But perhaps she had only fainted. She started to walk towards her; to see if there was something she could do for her.

“Where do you think you’re going, slave?” the Eye grunted. The Executor immediately came to stand in front of Idana, blocking her way.

“I was just… going to help her…” she muttered, realizing she was the center of all attention.

“We’ll take care of that stupid girl,” the Eye said with utter disdain. “She’s our slave.”

The Executor hit Idana in the chest with his spear, forcing her to step back. She was left sore and found it difficult to breathe.

“All kneel before the Boundary!” the Eye-of-the-God ordered.

They were placed in a row, on their knees, in the same order as in the carts. In front of them they could see the Boundary marked on the ground in intense gold. It was the forbidden limit established by the Gods. Nobody could cross it or else they would die, as the law laid down. She stared at the body of the unfortunate girl on the grass. An Eye was examining her.

The Rings were buzzing insistently, making their arms tremble uncontrollably. *What are they going to do with us?* Idana wondered. She was finding it hard to swallow, her mouth was so dry. She sighed, trying to calm her nerves, but the trembling was making her steadily worse. On her right Yosane was trying to stop her arm trembling, staring at the golden line with eyes full of anxiety. Idana turned her head to her left and saw Kyra further down the line. Idana raised her eyebrows in enquiry, but Kyra shrugged and shook her head. *What will happen to us?* The Executors came to stand behind them, in silence.

“Raise the arm with the Ring on it and look ahead!” the Eye ordered.

The prisoners started to do so. Some, like Yosane, could barely manage.

“Come on! Raise your arms! I won’t say it again, you useless slaves!”

The arms rose. The Executors held them fast. The Eye-of-the-Gods began to walk along the line. Idana tried to see what he was doing.

“Look straight ahead!”

Frightened, she obeyed. The Eye came to stand beside her. There was a flash and something cold, frozen, ran down her raised arm, as if an ice snake were slithering along it. *What’s this?* She heard Yosane moaning beside her and felt her fear.

The Eye moved away. The fear and tension grew with each breath.

“Let them cross over!” he ordered shrilly.

Idana’s heart skipped a beat. *Cross over? No!* She felt the sole of the Executor’s boot on her back, and a tremendous shove. She lurched forward and crossed the Boundary. She hit the ground with her face. She was overcome by convulsions. A terrible pain tore at every point of her body, bringing with it uncontrollable spasms. Her mind could bear it no longer and she lost consciousness, stretched out in the long damp grass.

Kyra awoke in agony. Her whole body ached. She tried to stand but was unable to. Her mind could not take in all the suffering her battered body was communicating. But she was alive, sore but alive. She had survived. She looked around in alarm. It was night-time, and she realized she was inside a strange building, circular and open, in the midst of a dense forest of tall beeches. She could hear a stream not far away, but for some reason the usual sounds of a forest at night were absent. A gloomy silence reigned. She had no idea how long it had been, but she felt as though she had been in the realm of dreams for a long time. Her companions were lying on the ground beside her, most of them still affected. They had been taken there while they were still unconscious. *Where are we? What is this place?* Kyra wondered blankly.

The building was both beautiful and odd. The floor was the color of silver, surrounded by a black marble wall more than fifteen feet high which formed a complete circumference. On the façade Kyra could make out innumerable indecipherable inscriptions and runes. She looked up at the sky, where countless stars shed a faint light. The Executors were standing guard along the wall, imperturbable. In the center of the building a rectangular monolith, black as an abyss, smooth as steel, rose tall and defiant toward the moon, it was more than sixty feet high. In front of the monolith Kyra saw something she had never thought to see: the Eye-of-the-Gods kneeling before a figure. Kyra's eyes opened wide as saucers as she stared in disbelief. An Eye kneeling! This was unheard-of! The figure was dressed in a white hooded cloak so that Kyra could not see its face, although she could make out golden eyes, which took her breath away. *What on earth is this being?* Yosane and Idana awoke at that moment, and Kyra went to their side without taking her eyes away from what was going on in the center.

"What's the matter?" Idana asked.

"I don't think it's anything good," Kyra said.

"Why do you say that?" Yosane asked.

Kyra pointed at the Eye and the figure he was kneeling in front of.

"This place looks like some sort of temple," concluded Yosane, who was studying the walls with interest.

"And who's that, then? A High Priest?" Kyra asked.

Yosane shrugged. Suddenly the Eye stood up and faced them. Fear washed over them, the way a wave washes over a ship in a storm.

“On your feet, all of you!”

The prisoners obeyed, some helping the others. Kyra counted twelve prisoners including herself. To her surprise she saw the girl who had run into the barrier get up as well. She could barely stand, but she was alive; they had not let her die. This was odd. Why had the Eye taken so much trouble over a mere slave girl? It did not make sense. They would never bother without some major reason; as far as they were concerned the girls were no more than worthless worms. *How weird.…*

“It’s time to set off on the journey,” said the sinister figure who commanded the temple. The Executors took a step forward. The figure began a strange chant, and the inscriptions on the walls began to glimmer.

Kyra felt her nerves running wild. The floor started to tremble amid the golden flashes which were issuing from the walls. She looked down at the floor in terror. It was changing shape, turning liquid, like molten silver.

“It can’t be!” she cried.

The floor turned into a silver lake.

And engulfed them.

11

Ikai ran through the gloomy tunnel as though a pack of rabid dogs were chasing him. He glanced back but could not make out whether he was really being followed; he had the feeling that he was, and his feelings rarely betrayed him. *The hooded guard has discovered me,* he thought, and cursed silently. What other horrors were awaiting him down there? Better not stay to find out, and instead get out of that place of suffering as soon as possible. *Kyra isn't here, and my life is in greater danger every moment I stay.*

He arrived at another of the strange dungeons and took a quick look inside. It was like the one he had left behind: circular, with floor and dome in silver, but bigger. There were twice as many spherical cages forming a circle in the middle of the chamber. *The deeper into this labyrinth I go, the bigger the chambers and the more prisoners there are in them. I don't like this at all.* He shivered and shrugged. The chamber did not appear to be guarded. He debated whether to keep going or wait. But he could not wait, as the hooded one would appear behind him any moment. He took a deep breath and walked into the light of the chamber-dungeon.

In the tunnel on his right there appeared a shadow. Ikai withdrew like a flash and hid in the darkness of the tunnel. He waited, his heart pounding. He breathed deeply, trying to calm his heart, which was racing. He listened carefully, trying to identify what was going on. He heard a metallic sound: one of the spherical cages was opening. He heard the whimpering of one of the prisoners. A grunt, almost bestial, put an end to it. Soon after he caught the sound of the prisoner's body being dragged along the ground. They were taking him away. Ikai did not even want to imagine the terrible fate of that poor man.

He waited a moment, without risking a glance, while he reflected. What did the Enforcers of the Gods do with their prisoners? They were just simple peasants, workers, and in very bad condition, so why were they needed? It could hardly be to produce anything… The place was not a mine, or a smithy, or anything of the kind. What went on down there? Ikai had no answers, but a feeling as cheerless as a bottomless well came over

him. Something very sinister was going on there. *I have to get out right away.*

He kept going, bent double, and went into the chamber. He saw the poor wretches in their spherical cages. Nobody said anything; they were so terrified that they averted their eyes from Ikai's. They did not want him to be there. He wondered which way to go. He was aware that he had to go back, retrace his steps. He stared at the three tunnel mouths that led out of the chamber. The first one, behind him, was the one he had come in from, and the one he wanted to take to get back. But that hooded figure armed with its bow might appear at any moment. He could not go to the right as that was the direction in which *something* had taken the prisoner. Those two options were out, so he chose the only one left, the one he did not want to follow because it led him away from the exit. He took it and walked on warily in the half-light. The passage opened into a triangular hall, which surprised him. Up to now everything in that complex had been round or spherical. The floor of the chamber was black, not silver. But what really surprised Ikai was the rectangular monolith with polished marble surfaces which rose in the center of the chamber. It was as black as a starless night and nine feet tall.

It buzzed like a swarm of bees.

Ikai walked slowly up to it and eyed it closely. It seemed to have a life of its own. The rectangular shape and the polished surfaces were pure perfection, with not a single flaw. It was too perfect to be man-made. For some reason it seemed to invite touching. Ikai reached out his arm and warily moved his hand towards it. He hesitated. Should he touch it or not? He looked around. There was no danger, and so he made his decision. He touched the surface with the palm of his hand. It was warm. A white flash came out of the monolith, illuminating the chamber. Ikai reached for his weapons and looked in every direction. Fear was clutching his body. The floor began to change color, gradually turning translucent. Ikai stared at it in awe.

Power of the Gods!

Suddenly he could see the lower level, as if ceiling and walls had turned crystalline. But not only what was below his feet: the whole level below. A labyrinth of chamber-dungeons was revealed, connected by tunnels and filled with spherical cages one level below the one he was in. A

knot formed in his stomach. The light went on descending and showed him the next level: this too was filled with dungeons. To his regret, the light went on descending, Ikai counted five underground levels before the light stopped and came back up again. Each level showed the same horror: an endless sequence of dungeons filled with cell-spheres.

Ikai was appalled. Anxiety clutched his chest with an iron grip. He sighed deeply and stared at the monolith. It had to be some kind of transport to the other sub-levels. *The Dungeons of Oblivion are immense. They must have thousands of people down there. But what do the Gods need them for? What for?* He shook his head; he was deeply upset, and a sour unease had taken hold of him. Unfortunately only the Gods had answers to those questions. He moved away from the monolith, and the chamber went back to normal.

The sound of dragging footsteps reached Ikai's trained ears. They were coming from the tunnel, very close. He crouched behind the monolith and let the shadow of the strange artifact hide him. With luck he could stay out of sight of whoever was approaching. He kept totally silent, hardly daring to breathe, hands and back pressed against the warm marble surface, trying to melt into it.

The footsteps came closer. They were coming into the hall. Making use of his experienced senses, his hearing strained, he tried to perceive the scent of a threat. *It's someone big, an Executor… no… the Executors move more slowly and heavily. This walk is dragged out… But the smell is typical of the Enforcers of the Gods: something like sulfur…* He lowered his head and half-closed his eyes. He crouched even lower against the surface at his back and stayed still, making his body into a stone statue, his breathing suspended and his heartbeats diminished.

The steps moved up to the monolith and stopped on the other side.

Come on, come on, keep going, Ikai prayed, closing his eyes.

A deathly silence settled on the hall, and time seemed to stand still. Ikai's heartbeats sounded to him like war drums which might be audible leagues away. He listened tensely, trying not to breathe: two steps sounded to the left, towards the way out. Instinctively he glanced in the opposite direction, planning to escape by the tunnel he had come in. He held his breath as he made out a silhouette in the tunnel amid the shadows.

He was trapped! Ikai swallowed. Behind the monolith there came another step. A strange rhythmic breathing, almost a hiss, reached him, and a shadow jutted out to his left. It slid along the floor and grew menacingly on his own body. The shadow took shape in the form of the silhouette of a strong man, until at last it was clear on the floor. It suggested the outline of a sinister head. Ikai was petrified.

“I cannot see you, but I can smell your slave’s stink,” came a hissing voice.

Ikai gripped his weapons tightly.

“Come out from behind there and show yourself to me, you worm.”

They had found him out! There was no escaping now. He breathed deeply, then spun around as he got to his feet and faced that threatening voice. His blood froze in his veins. No, it was certainly not an Executor. It was something different. Something he had never seen before. Something no-one had ever seen before. It was terrifying. Ikai half-closed his eyes to study it better. What was it? It was not as tall or broad-shouldered as an Executor, although more so than himself. But it seemed more slippery than the warrior Enforcers. The monster’s skin was the characteristic ochre-tan of the Enforcers of the Gods, and the same dark veins ran under it. The head was covered by a strange helmet, similar yet different to that of the Executors. It was brown at the back, and the front was covered by hundreds of tiny metallic scales, intensely green. But what struck fear into Ikai’s heart were the eyes: yellow, reptilian, with a long, narrow black iris. He felt he was looking into the eyes of an enormous snake. Instead of a mouth there was only a round hole. He began to tremble.

The monster was dressed in a golden-green robe. On the front and back he wore a cuirass of green scales engraved in gold. His cape bore strange symbols embroidered in an olive color. Short greaves and brownish-green gauntlets protected the limbs. The hands held a coiled whip and an ominous-looking curved machete.

“You are no prisoner!” he hissed furiously under his helmet.

Ikai felt his skin crawl. In his mouth was the bitter taste of fear, but he did not flinch. He had to escape. He could not fight against an Enforcer; it would be suicide. The sentinel let the tip of the whip fall to the floor.

“No, I’m a Hunter,” Ikai replied. He kept his voice firm and showed his Ring. Perhaps his position might confuse his captor.

“A Hunter? And what are you doing here? No slave is allowed in here, neither Hunter nor Regent. These are the domains of the Oppressors. Down here we are the sentinels. This underworld belongs to us. You belong to us, slave.”

Ikai was silent in the face of the Oppressor’s sinister presence, trying to figure a way out.

“This quadrant, these dungeons, are forbidden to the slaves. Only the Enforcers of the Gods may set foot in here.”

Ikai nodded and flexed his legs in anticipation. The situation was desperate. The Oppressor circled around Ikai, dragging his whip on the floor with sinuous movements. “And tell me, slave, what is the punishment for those who disobey the law of the Gods?”

Ikai followed him with his gaze, very alert. This sentinel was making him very nervous.

“Death,” he replied dryly.

The Oppressor stopped. “Exactly, slave, death,” he said, and emphasized the last word with his sinister voice.

Ikai gathered his courage together and defiantly showed his weapons.

“How dare you? How dare you draw arms against an Enforcer of the Gods? Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m not going to let you torture me, like you do the thousands you’ve got locked up in here.”

“They know what is good for them. No slave has ever beaten an Enforcer of the Gods. We are superior, little man; we are much stronger, more agile and better fighters. You will never beat me, not in a thousand years.”

“That may be so, but I’ll fight all the same.”

“Stupid worm. I was going to kill you swiftly, but now you will suffer this affront in blood. Before I cut out your tongue I will make you spit out the reason why you are here and how you managed to get in. Then I will tear off your skin, strip by strip, and when you scream for mercy I will eat your heart while it is still beating.”

The Oppressor’s arm launched a whiplash. Ikai barely saw it coming. He felt a searing pain in his arm, but did not drop his sword. He glanced at it in a single heartbeat and saw blood. The whip lashed again and Ikai leapt

to one side. The leather lash hit the floor, brushing his leg as it passed. He regained his balance and launched a stroke at the sentinel's neck, but his machete parried it with unbelievable speed. Ikai counterattacked with his dagger, seeking his enemy's armpit, but the Oppressor blocked it with his arm and delivered a tremendous kick which caught Ikai in the stomach and threw him hard against the monolith. He lost his weapons and was left lying on the floor. His side hurt terribly and he could barely breathe.

"Stupid slave. You are nothing but a weak dying race. I am going to enjoy gutting you."

Ikai tried to stand, but was unable to rise further than his knees. The whip lashed, hard. A terrible pain in the neck caught Ikai by surprise. Now he could no longer breathe. He peered down at his throat and saw the end of the whip firmly coiled around his neck. The Oppressor was pulling hard, strangling him. Desperately he tried to unwind it with his hands, but it was impossible. The Oppressor laughed with fierce disdain. Ikai felt with his hand for his sword while he struggled, but met only the cold floor. With an enormous effort he half-turned his head against the pressure of the whip. He thought his head was about to be torn off. His hand fell short of his sword by a matter of inches. Out of the corner of his eye he sensed a slight movement at the entrance to the tunnel. The hooded figure which had been chasing him loomed out the shadows. All hope of survival was buried under a mountain of despair. Now there were two enemies. He was finished, he was going to die.

The Oppressor turned his attention from Ikai to the hooded figure.

"By the Gods! What is happening here?"

There was a slight hiss, followed by a dull bump.

"Damned treacherous slaves!" cried the Oppressor. An arrow was buried in his neck.

Ikai was left gasping.

The Sentinel shook his arm hard, ignoring the arrow and freeing the end of the whip from Ikai's neck. The boy fell to one side. As he hit the ground he filled his lungs with the air he had been denied. There came another hiss. The arrow hit the cuirass but failed to pierce it. The hooded figure nocked another arrow, but it was too late. The whip lashed and caught the weapon, and with a powerful tug the hooded figure was disarmed. The Oppressor moved forward like a viper and hit the hooded

figure so hard it flew back against the wall behind. The figure hit the rock of the chamber hard and fell to the floor.

Ikai took advantage of the opportunity. Picking up his weapons from the floor he threw himself on to the Oppressor's back, but was hit hard by the back of the creature's arm and was sent rolling to one side. He got to his knees with his weapons at the ready, and the sentinel turned to face him.

"You will pay dearly. I will eat both your hearts!"

He took a step towards Ikai, but the hooded figure launched itself at his feet and buried its knife in the back of his left thigh. The Oppressor grunted and kicked away the hooded figure. Ikai raised his right hand. He concentrated, measuring the distance, and waited. The Oppressor turned towards him. With all his strength, Ikai drove his arm forward. The sentinel took a step back. The dagger had caught him in the neck, an inch above the arrow. Ikai watched without being able to breathe, sure he would fall this time; the wounds were lethal, he would not be able to stay on his feet. But he did not fall. He advanced towards Ikai, who stared at him in astonishment. He raised his whip. Ikai rolled on the floor to meet it. The lash exploded in his ears, but this time the tip did not touch him. With a quick, powerful thrust he pierced the sentinel's right leg. With both legs wounded, he fell to his knees, dropped his weapons and put his hands to his neck. He was drowning in his own blood.

Ikai stepped back, panting, and watched him die amid spasms. "He didn't look human… he should have died with the first arrow…" he muttered as he stared at the body. He knelt beside it, intrigued. What was this Oppressor? He tried to take off the unusual helmet. He pulled hard, but could not dislodge it. It seemed to have been shaped over the head itself, without clasps to allow it to be taken off.

"You won't be able to, it's never been done," a voice said in a barely intelligible grunt behind him.

Ikai spun around and saw the hooded, dark-clad figure lying against the wall.

"It's the same material as the rings and it works like them," the figure said with a moan as it tried to get up. "It's impossible to take it off.

Ikai went hastily across to it and offered it his hand.

"I don't need your help, you idiot," a woman's voice grunted under the hood.

Ikai was paralyzed by surprise. “Idiot?” he managed to say at last. “Who are you, and why do you insult me?”

“Who I am is none of your concern,” she said with a cry of pain, “and you’re an idiot because you almost got both of us killed.”

“I didn’t ask you to butt in…”

“Well, if I hadn’t, the Oppressor would’ve killed you and raised the alarm, and I’d have been doomed. I didn’t butt in for your sake, make no mistake about that.”

Ikai remained firm. “Well, maybe… maybe not. Anyway, thanks for your help.”

“I don’t want your gratitude, you bloody idiot. When the other guardians find the body it’ll be impossible to get back into this place. They’ll be twice as careful both in the dungeons and outside. I’ve been working for a long time to get into the dungeons without being detected. Every day a little further into this labyrinth of dungeons, always with absolute caution so as not to be detected and be able to return. And you’ve ruined it all in just one night! The work of months!”

Ikai did not know what to say. “I… I’m sorry…” he mumbled.

“And with all the risks I’ve taken!”

The young woman shook her head disdainfully. The hood fell back and her face was revealed to Ikai’s curious eyes. She was young, near his own age, with almond eyes black as night which shone with intense determination. Her hair was jet black, worn in a ponytail. She was not exactly pretty, not in the classic sense. Her features were pale and sharp, her nose small and pointed, and her lips were definitely provocative. But this young woman radiated unusual fierceness and strength, something which definitely impressed Ikai.

“Haven’t you ever seen a woman before? Stop glaring at me with those crazy eyes of yours and help me up.”

Ikai blushed and immediately helped her to her feet. She was not too tall, but her body was sinewy and agile, Ikai guessed she was used to physical effort. He glanced aside at her left arm, trying to find out what symbol she wore on the Ring on her arm. Unfortunately it was hidden by the sleeve of her dark tunic.

“My name is Ikai…”

She turned her head and looked at him intensely for a moment. Ikai prepared for another scornful comment.

“Mine’s Albana,” she replied obligingly, her eyes fixed on Ikai’s. “There’s no time for introductions, Hunter. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Ikai sighed and nodded. He put his arm around her waist to support her.

“Can you walk?” he asked her.

“I think so. My ribs hurt like crazy but I don’t think they’re fractured.”

“Half your face is bruised and your left eye’s swelling up.”

“Well, your neck doesn’t look very good either. Give me my bow and let’s get out of here before they discover us. They’ll soon change the guard, and they’ll notice if one of them is missing. If we don’t get out of the Quadrant before they find out and raise the alarm, we’re dead.”

She looked down at the body of the dead Oppressor. “I would’ve killed him, but good work with that dagger.”

“In the thousand years our people have lived as slaves, very few have managed to kill one of the Enforcers of the Gods. You can count them on the fingers of one hand.” Ikai said

“You mean you don’t believe me? I would’ve killed him. You have no idea who I am or what I’m capable of.”

Ikai was shocked by her comments. Who was she? And most important, what was she doing there? Albana seemed to read his thoughts. She put her finger to her lips.

“Let’s go,” she said. “No time for questions now.”

They made their way along the tunnels in search of the way out. Ikai soon realized Albana knew the passages and guard posts like the back of her hand. She pointed out where to go, when to move on and when to wait so as not to coincide with the guards patrolling the dungeons. Ikai tried to keep his sense of direction, but Albana followed a different route from the one he had taken and he was soon completely lost. Finally they reached a dark room where two tunnels ended. At the back a stone staircase led to the surface. Half-way up an Oppressor was on guard, making sure nobody came in or went out. They withdrew from the mouth of the tunnel and hid in the shadows.

“Wait here,” Albana whispered in his ear, so faintly it was as if she had merely sowed the idea in his mind. She disappeared back into the tunnel.

Ikai waited in silence. He had the feeling that any moment the Oppressor would come into the tunnel and find him. Suddenly he heard a jingling sound, as if something metallic had rolled across the floor. It came from his right, from the other tunnel. He listened hard and heard the footsteps of the sentinel coming down the stairs. His stomach lurched. Suppose the guard was coming towards him? He reached for his sword.

Suddenly Albana appeared behind him, startling him. She passed him, holding her side. She went on to the mouth of the tunnel and stopped for an instant to look inside the room. The guard was not at his post. She beckoned to Ikai, and they both crossed the hall at a run. They reached the outside at last, behind one of the enormous storage buildings.

“Good trick,” Ikai said.

“They’re like bloodhounds, if they hear anything they go sniffing. Luckily, they’re not very clever”

“And now what? How do we leave the Quadrant? There are Executors on the watch out there.”

Albana grinned roguishly and pointed to the top of the building.

“That way?”

“Yes, that way. There are no guards on the roofs, only in the gardens and buildings. The Enforcers of the Gods don’t like heights. Don’t ask me why.”

Ikai nodded and sighed. Why had he not thought of that way himself?

“And how do we get up there?” he asked. It was quite a height.

Albana moved on at a crouch along the wall until they reached the middle.

“Here,” she said.

Ikai made out a black rope, and understood. They climbed up to the roof, and Albana guided him from building to building until they reached an elevated water tank very close to the outer wall. From the tank they dropped onto the wall. Ikai found it difficult to jump and keep his balance, but Albana moved like a black cat, even handicapped by her wounds. With a final sigh Ikai slid down to the street, outside the forbidden quarter. He offered his partner in flight a smile of relief at having escaped, and in gratitude for her help. In fact the girl was really intriguing. The mystery which surrounded her, together with her courage and strength, seemed very

appealing… Their eyes met. *Yes, certainly attractive…* he could not help thinking.

Albana was eying him with amusement. Suddenly she tensed. Her glance pierced Ikai.

“Sorry, can’t let myself get caught,” she said, and hid her face under her hood.

Ikai looked at her blankly. Without warning she launched a powerful kick at Ikai’s groin. He doubled up sideways in a sea of pain, and fell to the ground holding his crotch.

“There’s too much at stake,” Albana said, and ran down the street.

Behind him Ikai heard running footsteps.

“Stop! Stop in the name of the Regent’s Guard!” came a commanding voice.

Ikai twisted his body and saw a dozen soldiers running towards him. He cursed to himself; they must have seen the two of them climbing down the wall.

Betrayal. She left me to them to save herself. He was filled with pain and fury, but he could not get up.

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When the pain finally left her body and the dizziness receded, Kyra inhaled the cool breeze deeply in an attempt to recover. What on earth had happened? She remembered how the floor had turned into molten silver and swallowed them all. But she was alive! She felt her arms and legs to make sure she was still in one piece.

She took a cautious look at her surroundings. She was in another building, practically identical to the one which had swallowed them. The unusual floor was once again solid, made of silver, and around it was the same high black marble wall forming a perfect circumference. The runes engraved on it still radiated a faint golden light. But it was not the same temple. Kyra looked up above the wall and could not see the forest which had surrounded them before. Where there had been tops of leafy beeches was now clear sky. Where it had been night scattered with bright stars, now only a few white clouds adorned an immaculate canvas of blue.

All the same, a threatening shadow loomed over the whole building. Kyra turned in search of the sun and in so doing, saw behind her something which amazed her. A colossal black monolith reared up into the infinite sky, blocking the presence of the sun. It was as black as a bottomless well and devoured the light around it, creating a sense of emptiness, of being surrounded by a translucent aura. Its shape, completely rectangular with its four ridges rising to the sky, was pure perfection. The four sides, polished to a masterly finish, shone with a strange splendor. It was very like the monolith in Osaen, but far larger. Kyra gazed at it in awe. The size of this strange object was unimaginable, so immense the mind had trouble taking it in… A base of white marble supported it, and this alone was taller than the temple itself.

No, they were definitely not in the same temple, and nor was it the same time. When she realized this, Kyra felt the chill breeze of fear run through her. She shivered. She turned around to find the other girls; the warmth of their company would help her get rid of this horrible feeling.

Yosane and Idana were beside her, pale as snow, unable to utter a word, staring, like her, at the monolith.

“On your feet, all of you!” a strident voice cried.

Kyra followed the sound and saw the Eye-of-the-God. In a semi-circle behind him his Executors waited.

“Swine!” she said to herself, rage burning in her stomach.

They had also been swallowed; all the same, they did not seem to have suffered the rigor of the passage as the girls had. Narrowing her eyes, she searched among the Enforcers of the Gods until she found the High Priest in his white robe with his head covered by the hood. *He’s got something to do with this journey of ours, I’m sure of it.* The twelve slaves hastened to get to their feet, some of them showing clear signs of not yet having fully recovered. One of them, pale as snow, threw up and spattered Lian’s foot. The pampered blonde leapt back, cursing and insulting the poor girl. With cries of disgust she ordered Urda to move this peasant away from her. Urda moved forward, then stopped when she saw the girl fall dizzily to her knees.

The Executors surrounded them, spears ready. The High Priest placed his hands on the dark marble of the wall and the runes flashed. Kyra watched in alarm. When he took his hands away, amid a strange buzzing as though this were some enormous beehive in full swarm, a third of the wall descended and disappeared into the floor. Kyra and Yosane exchanged puzzled glances, tinged with fear.

They were led outside the temple. As they walked towards the base of the huge monolith Kyra was dumbfounded. Everything around her, wherever she turned her gaze, was blue, absolutely blue. For a moment she thought the sky might have fallen to earth and raised her eyes to check. When she saw it was still there, reigning in splendor with the majestic sun smiling down on her, her heart went faster and she was afraid. So what was that infinite blue mass all around them? She breathed deeply and tried to think. It looked like water, like the lakes in the First County, only much bluer and wider, as if it had no end. An enchanting blue bathed the horizon in the distance.

“What…?” was all she managed to say before words failed her.

Idana’s gaze was lost on the horizon. “It’s… I think it… it must be…”

“The only thing it can be… is the sea…” Yosane said. Her eyes were wide as saucers.

The sea!

With the word, a hundred memories, ideas and past conversations surged up in Kyra's mind. Without thinking, she looked at her tattoos. Nobody had ever seen the sea, not since they had been enslaved by the Gods a thousand years before. But the Senoca traditions, their legends and folklore, spoke of its existence and were passed down from grandparents to parents to children so they would never forget where they came from and where they were to return. Kyra had heard descriptions of it… a host of them… and they all paled in comparison to the immense beauty in front of her eyes at that moment. She watched that infinite wonder of nature, the place her people came from. A calm sea, a blue ocean as beautiful as it was infinite.

"What beauty!" Idana said.

Yosane put her hands to her face. "It's simply unbelievable!"

Kyra moved forward as though in a trance, unable to believe or to assimilate the grandeur and beauty of what surrounded her. She was not the only one; behind her Lian and Urda were also moving forward with their eyes lost in the immensity of the ocean. Soon all twelve were staring at Mother Sea.

"It's the sea… the sea…!" the prisoners began to murmur amid cries of surprise and recognition as they started to make sense of their environment. Soon all the voices were silent and their young eyes devoured the beautiful landscape. Before the greatness of what they saw and what it meant for them, the twelve fell to their knees and spread their arms in a prayer to Mother Oxatsi that she would take them with her.

"Keep moving, stupid creatures!" came the Eye's strident shout.

The Executors used their spears to strike and shove the prisoners. The girls resisted, not wishing to part from their protective mother. But the Executors were relentless and the prisoners were forced to go on.

Yosane waved her hand around her in a full circle. "We're on an island. It's bigger than the one in the middle of the great river when it crosses the Second County, but it's an island, that's absolutely certain."

Kyra looked around, without losing sight of the Executors and their spears. It was true, they were on an island. There was little vegetation on it and it was rocky and arid. It was not excessively big, because three of its four corners could be seen from where they were. There were white birds in

the sky, but for some reason they did not come near the great monolith. The girls were led to it, and the Eye-of-the-Gods went into the base through a round door and disappeared inside.

They waited restlessly, surrounded by the Executors, who watched them impassively. The girls looked all round fearfully, trying to understand where they were and why, and above all what was going to happen to them. But they had found Oxatsi, Mother Sea, and that gave them courage, courage that would help them survive.

Yosane bent over and twisted her head. She pointed to her right.

“Look! Slaves!” she whispered.

On the other side of the monolith was a long line of men with their hands tied at their back, joined by ropes around their necks. They all wore long lemon-yellow robes which stood out in the distance. They were escorted by Executors on both sides, and two Eyes led their column. The prisoners were sturdy men, broad-shouldered and strong-legged.

“Who are these poor wretches? Where are they taking them?” Idana wondered. There was concern in her voice.

“They’re strong,” murmured Kyra. “They’re probably taking them to do forced labor, to the mines, from what I’ve heard…”

“Do you recognize them?” interrupted Yosane. “Do you know what county they come from?”

“No… I couldn’t tell you…”

Yosane looked at Idana, who shrugged. “Nor me,” she muttered.

“Perhaps it’s because of those really striking clothes they wear,” Idana said. “It hurts the eyes.”

“Perhaps,” said Yosane, not fully convinced.

They followed the men with their gaze as they went towards the sea down a set of steps carved out of the rock. And then all of a sudden they disappeared as if they had been swallowed by that infinite sea which surrounded them. Kyra craned her neck, but from the plateau where they stood she could see no further.

“Mother Sea has swallowed them!”

“Look behind,” Yosane said.

Idana and Kyra turned and took a surreptitious look. Behind the great Monolith they saw a large building of one floor. In front of it a great

number of men in brown robes were piling boxes beside several carts while others loaded them. An Eye seemed to be taking notes of everything being loaded and a dozen Executors stood stoically on guard.

“Supplies of some sort…” Idana ventured.

“They’re loading them to take them somewhere, but where?” Kyra said, looking toward the far end. “There’s nothing here except rocks and dry bushes.”

“Yes, that’s strange,” Yosane said.

The Eye-of-the-God reappeared. “Start moving, slaves!” he ordered.

They walked to the edge, where the plateau ended, and before their eyes, as if out of nowhere, there appeared a bay in the shape of a half moon. In its very center was a substantial merchant port. Several ships could be seen, great cargo vessels, most of them at anchor and some already setting off towards the open sea, heavily loaded.

“The port is… enormous…” Yosane whispered. “There must be close to a hundred ships.”

Kyra shaded her eyes from the sun, which was now bathing her with fire and life.

“And what on earth are all those ships doing here?”

Yosane narrowed her eyes and stared at the ships.

“They look like twin-sailed triremes. The biggest ones have their holds arranged for cargo. They use the wind to sail, but if they’re too heavily loaded —which seems to be the case here— or the capricious breath of the Gods doesn’t fill the sails, they use the oarsmen. From the dimensions of those ships I’d guess they must carry about sixty in each galley, maybe more. At least that’s how they sail along the great river, and I should think it’s the same with these. Trade between the main cities and the capital, as well as the transport of goods, Proxies and Enforcers depends on those triremes. If they’re using them here it’ll be for the same reasons.”

Kyra smiled, with a touch of sarcasm. “Is there anything you don’t know?” she commented.

Yosane blushed. “Oh, a lot…” she said shyly, and looked away.

The Enforcers quickened the pace, and the group went down the stairs to the pier. The activity on the docks was frantic, with numbers of slaves loading the ships with all kinds of materials and containers. From amphorae

to enormous crates, as well as cattle, victuals and a multitude of slaves. In front of each ship an Eye was posted, who made a note of everything that was loaded onto each ship. Seeing the steady bustle and all the movement of goods and people, Kyra felt the urge to slip away and board one of those triremes to escape. For a single crazy moment she even considered it seriously, but she realized it would be suicide to try. All along the pier there were Executors on guard, and several patrols were on foot. Besides, she had no idea where these ships were going. It was not a brilliant plan, but then she was not really one for making plans, much less brilliant ones. She shook her head unhappily and went on. At least Ikai would be glad she had not tried anything rush.

The group of slaves in yellow robes was led up onto one of the ships, and as they went past Kyra could see they were being chained to the oar-benches.

“Yellow robes, oarsmen,” she told Yosane with a wink. Yosane smiled shyly back.

They went along the whole pier on the eastern side until they were nearly at the end. An Eye-of-the-Gods awaited them. Beside the Enforcer of the Gods a ship with a single sail was moored, swaying with the movement of the waves. It was lighter and more ornamented than the rough cargo triremes. The Eye in charge of the group walked ahead to speak with the other Eye in a low voice. The latter approached the group and briskly studied each of the prisoners, taking notes incessantly in a silver book with his bony ochre finger. Kyra had no idea what he was writing, but she felt as if she were being measured before being put in a box. Cursed bastards! She wished with all her heart she could grab the book from his hands and kill him with it. She clenched her fists as rage consumed her.

The Eye barked a sudden order. “On board, slaves!”

The Executors came to harass them immediately, and with fear in their hearts the prisoners obeyed.

They sailed for hours, heading deeper into a measureless blue ocean. Yosane gazed at it in puzzlement while her timid spirit struggled to summon up courage, since the beauty of that sea imbued her with cheer and hope.

They had been placed at the prow, and half a dozen Executors formed a line to deny them access to the rest of the ship. At the stern, two Eyes-of-the-Gods were talking with a strange Enforcer who appeared to be the Captain. He was dressed like the Eyes, but his helmet was different: bluer. Yosane had never seen anything of the kind. She avoided looking at the Captain and shook her shoulders to get rid of the shiver which ran down her back every time she caught a glimpse of him.

Kyra and Idana were in front of her, standing at the foremost point of the bow. They seemed to be enjoying the journey. This was not the case with Lian and some of the other prisoners, who were soon seasick from the movement of the ship and had spent half the day throwing up over the gunwale. Urda on the other hand was sitting still in the center of the deck with her arms folded. The wind was blowing strongly, the billowing sail pushed the ship whose high prow cut the waves. Yosane tried to guess where they might be heading. If her calculations were correct, they had been traveling north ever since leaving the island. As she did not know where they had started from — they had appeared on the island without any point of reference — any guess as to where they were was totally useless. Still, at least she had one point of reference, and if they found another she could begin to calculate their position.

The breeze brushed her face, and Yosane gazed at the peerless beauty of that blue sea. For one moment an absolute sense of peace filled her, and all the fears which usually tormented her spirit were swept away from her heart. For several long wonderful moments she enjoyed a peace she had not known in weeks. Since the ill-fated day when her Ring had shone on her arm and her world had been turned upside down. She opened herself to Mother Sea, and her soul filled with a longed-for joy.

“Hellish bloody sea!” she heard Lian complain between bouts of gagging with her head hanging over the gunwale. She looked at the girl. She was beautiful, privileged, vain, yes, but also brave in her own selfish way. Yosane did not want to envy her but deep down, she did. In spite of all her drawbacks, she was brave. And that quality, so scarce in men in that time of slavery and submission, was what Yosane valued the most, because she lacked it herself. Shame overcame her and she shrank into herself. She knew it was not her fault, she told herself over and over again, but it did not help.

“Look, mist!” she heard Idana call out.

Yosane went over to her two friends and gazed at the horizon ahead of them. A heavy white mist rose over the sea like a ghostly presence, floating above the waves.

“Isn’t it weird?” Kyra said.

Yosane gazed at the clear evening sky, where not a cloud disturbed the blue. The breeze was warm and the sea had turned calm.

“Very weird, there shouldn’t be a mist in these conditions…”

Kyra nodded and looked ahead. The ship was moving fast toward the wall of mist, which rose ten feet above the surface and prevented them from seeing further. Yosane looked aside at the Captain and the Eyes, but their course stayed the same.

“We’re going into it!” she warned Kyra and Idana. “Hold on!”

In the blink of an eye the ship entered the mist and they were swallowed by a damp, whitish cloak. They could see nothing around them, not even on the ship itself. Yosane held out her arm, searching for Idana’s. They touched and held hands. The wind dropped completely and a gloomy silence enveloped them. Suddenly there came a loud noise of wood on wood. Yosane froze as a new sound reached her ears, that of water being beaten.

“Oars!” she said excitedly. “They’ve taken out the oars!”

The sound developed a rhythm, the oars plunged into the water propelling the ship and came out of the water with a methodical cadence. Yosane calmed down a little, but not being able to see what was around her made her heart race. In the midst of that thick gloomy mist, to the rhythm of the drum, on a sea as still as a mirror, she felt as if they were entering the realm of the dead. She had a sick feeling in her stomach, a horrible presentiment. Suddenly the mist vanished. Yosane looked back in surprise and realized that they had left it behind; they had gone through it and beyond.

“By my brother’s blood!” she heard Kyra cry.

Yosane turned and was overwhelmed by what she saw. She had to rub her eyes to be sure it was true.

“But… but… how can it be?” Idana asked.

Yosane stared at the giant waterfall rising ahead of them in the middle of the sea. It was sixty feet high and its width filled the horizon. An endless stream of water fell along its entire length, hurling itself on the sea, breaking against the waves with foam as white as snow. The sound of the water constantly breaking against the sea reached them like a furious murmur. The ship headed straight towards it.

“It’s going to swallow us!” Idana cried.

Kyra stood up, ready to jump overboard.

Yosane glanced at the Captain and the Eyes-of-the-Gods, who remained unperturbed.

“Back!” one of the Eyes ordered.

Kyra hesitated for a moment, then stepped back. Idana did the same. The Executors came forward. Seizing all the girls who were by the forward gunwale, they threw them back to the center.

They don’t want us to fall into the sea, Yosane wondered. *How odd! It looks as though they want us alive. I wonder why, or rather what for.*

The ship headed rapidly toward the great wall of water before them. Yosane felt the beginnings of panic, and Kyra threw her a questioning glance. A silver flash of great intensity filled the sky. They turned to see the Captain holding a small disc on the palm of his hand. The disc sent out two more potent flashes, then the Captain closed his hand over it. At once there came a violent buzzing, as if the sea bottom was shaking. But it was not the sea, it was the waterfall. A small part of it now began to sink into the sea, creating a passage for the ship.

Yosane looked on in awe. This was no work of men. It would have been impossible to build something like that, still less to operate it that way. The ship went through the giant waterfall along the open passage and held its course along what now looked like a great channel. Behind them the submerged part emerged from the water and closed once again. There was no way out.

Kyra looked in every direction in turn. “What the hell? We’re in a channel!”

As they advanced Yosane realized that the waterfall was really a great wall, decorated so as to look like an endless waterfall. This surprised her immensely, but not as much as what she saw next.

“By Oxatsi!” Idana muttered.

Yosane’s eyes were sending images to her brain which she was finding hard to make sense of. Before her eyes, on both sides of the channel, a beautiful city rose in splendor. Immense palaces with enormous lakes, ornamented with countless fountains and cultivated gardens came into sight as they moved on. The palaces were blue mingled with white — splendid, worthy of Gods. Each palace had one or more lakes in the form of gardens, and the gardens were extravagantly-shaped with fountains and small waterfalls at different heights. Where there should have been streets and avenues were rivers and channels. An uncountable number of small boats were moving along them, but from the distance their occupants could not be seen.

Unbelievable, was all Yosane could think.

“What is this place?” Kyra asked.

Yosane shaded her eyes with her hand. In the distance, where the channel ended, in the very center, she made out an imposing island. Even from where they were it looked like a colossal mountain with a single peak, floating over the water. Looking closer, the whole surface proved to be teeming with exuberant palaces and monuments, from the base to the elevated peak, where a giant monolith rose in search of the sun. And then she knew where they were.

“We’re in the Eternal City, the home of the Golden Gods!”

Kyra and Idana turned to her in amazement. An absolute and somber silence came over the other girls, hushing exclamations and speculations alike. If they were in the Eternal City, then there was no hope for any of them, since nobody had ever returned from that accursed place. Nobody. Ever.

The ship continued on its way along the channel. The silence on the deck was now that of a graveyard, broken only by the cadence of the oars. A broad new channel opened on both sides. Yosane’s attention was immediately caught. Elaborate granite and white marble bridges, with many massive arches, crossed the new channel towards the center, to the great island, following the direction the ship was taking.

They were entering a complex spider’s-web of channels and buildings. She needed to understand, it would come in useful later on. *Survive and escape,* as Kyra said, and to escape they needed to understand where they

were. Besides, that was something she was very good at. That was why she was a builder, like all her family. She could contribute knowledge, but she needed an elevated perspective. She gazed at the elaborate figurehead at the bow. She thought about it several times, searching inside herself for the courage she could never find. *I have to help! I need to contribute!* She summoned up her weak courage and with some difficulty climbed onto the figurehead, which rose six feet above the deck in the shape of an eagle's head. Idana saw her, and with her face a mask of fear helped her steady herself. Yosane held on as best she could, then with the aid of the sail ropes, stood up on top of the eagle's head.

Idana gave a muffled cry. "Get down, you'll kill yourself!" she said in a low voice so that the Executors would not hear her. But they seemed distracted, looking at the city around them. Lian and Urda noticed what was going on and stood up to watch their companion's daring. Yosane studied everything she could see from her elevated position. She filled her lungs and exhaled slowly, turning her head from left to right and back again in a sweeping survey that allowed her to see everything within reach of her eyes.

"Get down now!" Idana urged her, deeply worried.

Yosane glanced back at Idana. When she saw how high she had climbed and how unprotected she was, she came back to her senses. Fear gripped her at once. She held on to the rope with all her strength and began to shake uncontrollably.

"By Girlai!" Kyra cried. Before she had finished saying the words she was already climbing up the spur with the agility of a panther.

Lian went up to one of the Executors and pointed in the direction of the two girls. The Executor spun around.

"Get down from there, slaves!" they heard behind them. At the same time two Executors came towards the girls.

"Give me your hand, Yosane," Kyra said.

But Yosane was so scared she could barely breathe. She was not going to let go of that rope for anything in the world. Kyra swore and climbed up to her.

"Come on, let's go down," she said soothingly, and offered her hand with a smile.

The presence of her fearless friend calmed Yosane. She let Kyra help her and finally came down with difficulty. As soon as they were on deck the two Executors lunged on them. They were struck, ruthlessly. The two friends ended up lying on the deck, beaten.

“I hope it was worth it,” Kyra said. There was blood on the corner of her mouth.

“I think… I think so,” Yosane replied, as Idana tried to help Kyra.

They rested a while, still lying on the deck, as the ship advanced inexorably towards the great island in the center. The closer they came the more magnificent it looked, both in size and architectural beauty.

Lian and Urda came up to them. “Stop making so much trouble,” Lian said reproachfully. “You’ll get us all killed!”

“Leave them alone,” said Idana.

“I’m going to break that little nose of yours,” Kyra threatened with a grunt of pain from the deck.

Urda stepped forward. “Don’t even dream of it.”

“I think I have it,” Yosane said. All the girls turned to her. “The city has been built over water, it’s made of five concentric rings, and the innermost is that huge island-mountain. Separating each of the five rings there are channels which seem to act as borderlines. To join the center and the rings they’ve built huge bridges with more than a thousand arches, amazingly complex and beautiful, which reach as far as the outer waterfall.”

Urda scratched her head. “I don’t understand…”

Yosane eyed her and smiled gently. “Give me that ring on your finger” she said, pointing to the soldier’s hand.

Urda hesitated briefly, then took the ring off and gave it to Yosane.

“Now you, Lian.”

She shook her head and folded her arms. “In your dreams. My ring is worth more than you are.”

“Here, have mine,” offered Idana, “and let’s have peace.”

Yosane took it and placed it on the palm of her hand. With the other she felt on the floor until she found a pebble. She placed the pebble in the center of Idana’s ring and showed it to Urda.

“The pebble is the big island,” she said. She waved it in front of her, where the great mountain was looming closer. “Idana’s ring is the first

circle. Between them is water. See?" Urda nodded. "Now I take your ring, which is bigger, and I put it round Idana's. This would be the second ring. Between your ring and Idana's there's water. And there are two more rings. Do you understand now?"

"Yes, now I understand."

Yosane smiled and returned the rings.

"Well, that's pretty stupid," Lian barked. "How does that help us?"

Kyra clenched her fist. "If you don't keep your mouth shut, I'll shut it myself."

Yosane looked ahead. "It helps us understand where we are. If you don't know the labyrinth, you're not likely to find the way out."

"Humph! Stupid riddles!"

Kyra came to stand beside Yosane. They stared at the magnificent island they were arriving at. Idana came to stand next to them.

"Tell me, Yosane what do you think is waiting for us ahead?" Kyra asked as she stared at the great monolith on the island's summit.

Yosane heaved a deep sigh. "There ahead of us the Gods are waiting. May Oxatsi, Mother Sea, take pity on our poor souls."

13

The dungeons beneath the barracks of the Regent's Guard were almost as hospitable as the Dungeons of Oblivion. Ikai let his body slide and lay face down on the hay which covered the cold stone floor. He felt as if he had been thrown off a wild horse, his body ached terribly, particularly his side. He spat blood and wiped his split lip. Through the bars of the cell he glimpsed the two wardens. They were as big as mountain bears and as ugly as wild boar. They had beaten him with a vengeance and he could barely breathe, much less move. But he had not told them anything, not a single word.

He kept going over the one thing which tortured him more than the physical pain: *Why did Albana betray me?* This question gnawed like acid at his guts.

"On your feet, prisoner!" one of the wardens brayed.

But he had no strength left to stand.

"I said on your feet!" the warden shouted again. He banged the bars with a wooden club.

All Ikai could do was open one eye. Between the hay and the bars he made out a familiar face. It was Istas, the Commander of the Guard, who was watching him sternly, his arms folded over the cuirass which covered his chest.

"I told you I wanted him in good condition, you donkeys!" the Commander said.

"He's alive, my lord…" said the more massive of the two wardens.

"Has he talked?"

"No, sir…"

Istas shoved the one closest to him. "You incompetents! Take him out of there!"

The two wardens hastened to open the cell.

"I'll come back at noon. Give him something to drink and some food. Burn his rags. I want him cleaned up and presentable. If he dies I'll make

eunuchs of you with my own hands. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir, absolutely, sir,” the two giants gabbled.

The sun was shining at its highest among a scattering of clouds with an almost divine purity when Ikai was brought out of the barracks and made to get on a cart pulled by two heavy working horses. Ikai thanked the heavens that they were not forcing him to walk, as he could barely stand. The gates of the walled-in precinct opened and they left the military quadrant behind them.

Six Guards escorted him, led by a Captain. He counted four women and three men under the helmets, armor and blue capes. It did not surprise him. The scarcity of men was growing as a result of the Quotas, forcing the Guard to recruit massively among the women. From what Ikai had seen, once they were well trained many of them were as skilled with weapons as the men, and in most cases more intelligent too. He could make out their sex by the shape of the bodies, since the plumed helmets they wore hid their faces so that nothing could be seen but their eyes. The Commander of the Guard brought up the rear, behind the cart.

“Istas, where are they taking me?”

The officer glared at him angrily. “As far as you’re concerned I’m Commander.” Istas showed him the Ring engraved with a Lion, which showed that he belonged to the military caste.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Istas…”

“Yes, a long time, but then you were a Hunter and I was an Officer of the Guard. We’ve worked together and shared a lot, that’s true, both working for the same goal: we both served the Regent. I don’t know what’s driven you to this betrayal, or whether you’ve completely lost your mind, although it comes to the same thing. You’ve brought dishonor on yourself, you’ve broken the law, and for that you’ll have to pay; with your life. You’re not a Hunter any longer, you’re an outlaw, a pariah, and I’m the Commander of the Guard.”

“I see that,” Ikai replied. He was watching the people move back quickly as the group passed by, shunning the procession. There was fear in

their gaze.

“Let me give you a piece of advice for the sake of the good times gone by: confess and beg for mercy, otherwise you’ll suffer a horrible death.”

“Thanks, Istas. I appreciate your kindness.”

“I really don’t understand what’s happened to you, Ikai. You must be out of your mind. You and I both serve the Regent. We enforce the laws of the Gods. We chase, capture and execute those who break them. If we don’t do this, the Gods themselves will come down from their Eternal City, bringing death with them. They’ll put an end to us, you know that.”

Ikai was silent. He knew that up to a point all this was true. Seeing an old woman avert her eyes from him and move her granddaughter away as they passed, Ikai remembered painful conversations with his sister in the past. Conversations which had filled him with remorse. Kyra saw things in black and white, only good and evil in people; for her there were no shades of gray. But the world Ikai was trying to make his way through was all gray, although it was a shade which went on darkening until it was almost black. And he was aware of this. All these thoughts became more definite as he continued his conversation with Istas.

“That’s what we say to justify our actions…”

“I’m not justifying anything. I’ve nothing to justify. I serve the Regent and follow the law of the Gods. Thanks to men like us, our nation survives.”

“Survives, yes…”

“There’s nothing more to say. I’ve chosen my path and you’ve chosen yours. Once there was comradeship between us, but that’s over.”

Ikai nodded. He could understand Istas, because he had been justifying his own actions with the same arguments. But how could he justify Kyra’s kidnapping and disappearance? Or his mother’s pain and suffering? No, there was nothing justifiable about that.

It did not take them long to cross the great central square. Ikai, as he always did, stared at the immense Monolith of the Gods rising to the clouds. That powerful arcane artifact had intrigued him ever since the first day he had set foot in the big city. He had no idea what it was for, but it was an instrument of the Gods and a very powerful one which awoke a great respect in him. Nobody ever went near the giant artifact of Power, not because it was forbidden but because it provoked great fear. They left the

enigmatic construction behind and arrived at the Regent's majestic palace. The retinue stopped at the entrance, in front of the Guard of Honor.

The great palace was huge, occupying a whole quadrant. Endless stairs, white as chalk, led up to a great arcade with twenty round columns. Both the columns and the façade had been painted gold in honor of the Gods. The blue of the Senoca, the People of the Sea, had been completely eradicated. The Regent, like the Priests, vied incessantly to please the Gods in every possible way. As for the people, that was a different story.

Two of the Guards helped Ikai to get down from the cart.

"Captain Liriana," Istas called.

The Captain presented herself hastily. "Commander."

Ikai noticed that the Captain glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. She had very large turquoise eyes which could not pass unnoticed. All the more when it was all he could see of her under her helmet and armor. Although another detail caught his attention: the Captain's legs were heavily worked and nicely outlined, which surprised and pleased him. Her right leg was tattooed on the outside with the characteristic sky blue of their people, representing the waves of Mother Sea from ankle to thigh.

"Have the escort wait here," Istas ordered.

The young woman gave her superior a brief salute. "At your command, sir."

"Can you walk?" Istas asked, and saw Ikai nod.

"Let's go, then," the Commander said, and led the way.

They walked into the building and Ikai was faced with spotless walls. They walked along the long corridor and immediately four Guards of Honor got behind him. After going through several enormous areas, luxurious and filled with ornaments, they reached a double door, strongly guarded. Istas presented himself to the Guards and after a moment they were allowed to enter.

They went into a big hall, which took Ikai's breath away. It was gigantic and magnificent. In the center was a thermal bathtub whose vapors rose to the ceiling and impregnated the silk curtains which surrounded it. Paintings and tapestries in lively colors hung from walls and ceiling; exquisite carpets covered the white marble floors. Silver trays filled with

exotic fruits were laid on tables, and a group of half-naked women were dancing around the water.

At the sight of all that luxury and waste Ikai felt a burning rage catch fire inside him like a funerary pyre. Luckily he was too weak to do anything about it, so he called upon his *sang froid* and calculating mind and tried to breathe deeply, letting out his breath slowly. He quieted the rage which was consuming him and focused on what was important: the people there.

Straight away he recognized the powerful and very dangerous Regent Sesmok, the man responsible for the destiny of each and every one of the Senoca, who was watching him from a great armchair with an elaborate round back. It looked to Ikai more like a throne than a mere armchair. The Regent's expression was stern. He was a thin man, still short of fifty, with a gaunt face. His prominent aquiline nose stood out more than his small sunken eyes: eyes as black as his soul.

On his right, sitting on a comfortable sofa with pillows, was the High Priest Torkem. His gross body completely filled the sofa, even though it was big enough for two. He was eating fruit, and his wide cheeks were as red as the wine in the silver goblet he was holding in his chubby fingers. Sitting in front of the religious leader was the leader of the Hunters, Lord Hunter Osvan, who gave Ikai a fiery look which went through him like an arrow.

Istas presented himself with an elaborate bow. "The prisoner, sir, as you ordered."

The Regent stood up. "Leave us, all of you," he ordered, and the women and servants left the hall at once. Sesmok approached Ikai slowly with a graceful, well-balanced movement, like a cat stalking its helpless prey. Istas moved to one side with a bow and Sesmok came to stand in front of Ikai, staring into his eyes fixedly. Ikai had the feeling that the man was trying to read into his soul.

"I'm trying to understand your decision and I find it unbelievable, Hunter. It's extremely difficult." He tilted his head to one side, staring directly into Ikai's eyes. "Lord Hunter Osvan" — he went on with a wave in the direction of the leader of the Hunters, who gave the trace of a nod — "tells me you're one of the most talented young Hunters we have, very qualified and highly recommended by Master Sejof, an authority in the profession. How is it possible that a young Hunter, trained and intelligent,

knowing the laws of the Gods, an implacable pursuer of infringers, could commit such an act, such an outrage?”

Ikai analyzed the tone, the cunning of the question, the manner of interrogation. He knew he was facing a very intelligent man. But also a very dangerous and ruthless one, as was well known among the Senoca.

“The Gods have taken away my sister,” Ikai replied bluntly.

Sesmok put his hands behind his back and took a few steps, nodding.

“I see… that would explain pain, suffering, but not what you’ve done. Confess now, tell me who helped you by giving you information about the forbidden quadrant. Tell me who your accomplice was, the one who managed to escape, and beg for mercy. Perhaps you’ll receive it…”

Ikai might be young, but he was not naive. His years as a Hunter had hardened him and taught him valuable lessons of life. He knew perfectly well that in this world neither Gods nor rulers would have mercy at all. *I don’t owe anybody loyalty, not Proxy Ambuk or least of all that traitor Albana. But I’ll gain nothing by talking, absolutely nothing. I’m already doomed, and death’s waiting for me. Condemning others to the same end wouldn’t be honorable.* He stared ahead and kept silent.

Sesmok raised one eyebrow and shook his head. “Don’t worry, we’ll catch your accomplice and whoever gave you privileged information. You know it very well, nobody manages to escape from my claws. Meditate on what you’ve done… you’ve ruined your career, your future and even the wellbeing of your family in a futile act which in any case was going to bring you nothing but death… and you knew it. You’re not the only one who has suffered this fate. Many have been separated from their loved ones and they resign themselves to the fact. After all, it’s the Gods’ chosen purpose… isn’t it so, High Priest Torkem?”

The religious leader sat up straighter on the sofa. “The Quotas are sacred,” he replied, “and the Summons, when they occur, are a blessing for those who are chosen, as they have been picked by the Gods themselves for their chosen purposes, which we mere mortals can never hope to understand. Their Divinities, in their eternal wisdom, require of us their mortal subjects that we obey and serve them, for such is our purpose on earth.” He glared at the young Hunter.

Ikai had had a bellyful of that same speech and others like it throughout his life. The Priests never ceased to instruct the enslaved people

with the goal of extinguishing any flame of hope. The implications of what they preached made him sick. If Kyra had been there she would have made the brute swallow his sermon. But Ikai was not his sister and he stayed calm. He had to; the situation was critical.

Sesmok circled him, walking slowly and deliberately, studying him. “As I was saying, young Hunter, many suffer painful losses when required to by our Gods, but very few — in fact almost no-one— acts in response, still less breaks an explicit law.” He stared into Ikai’s eyes. “The people know the laws and follow them. If not, they know death awaits them. A death which I don’t enjoy having to order, but I must because it’s my duty as leader of the Senoca and responsible before the Gods.” He spread his arms wide, with a look of resignation.

“A heavy load for the shoulders of a great man,” High Priest Torkem said to him.

Sesmok waved his arm in a gesture of gratitude. “Yes, a great responsibility falls on me. If I fail to do what the Gods demand, if I oppose their designs, they will descend upon us and annihilate our nation. There will be nobody left alive. Nobody will be safe from their wrath. Of that you can be certain. If I fail in my duty, the genocide of a whole people will be on my shoulders.” He turned to Lord Hunter Osvan. “What figure was given in the last census of our flourishing people taken by the Eyes-of-the-Gods?”

Osvan cleared his throat. “A total of one hundred thousand in the six Counties, sir, plus twenty thousand here in the capital.”

“One hundred and twenty thousand people… neither more nor less… We, the Senoca, the People of the Sea. We prosper because we follow the laws, because we do what is asked of us. In exchange our nation grows, the Gods are benevolent towards us, they give us technology, they’ve given us the smithy, they’ve even taught us the secrets of steel. And let me assure you, they don’t need to, we’re not the center of the universe… there’s a lot you don’t know out there, young Hunter, things which it is not appropriate for you to know.”

This puzzled Ikai. *What’s he hinting at? What’s out there? What secrets are they hiding from us?*

“Do you understand, young Hunter,” he whispered softly in Ikai’s ear, “that our entire civilization will perish if I fail? As you can see, my

responsibility is measureless, almost unbearable.” He gazed up at the lofty vaulting as he walked. “And as if this heavy load weren’t enough already I have to deal with the Eyes-of-the-Gods, the faithful Enforcers of the Gods, who inform their masters of everything that goes on. And let me tell you they are particularly obtuse. They don’t listen to excuses. For them it’s all either yes or no: you do what the Gods order or you don’t. I really believe they have no reasoning of their own, they only do their masters’ will. They make my life impossible, really impossible. That’s why I can’t allow myself so much as a single slip. A slip might lead us to annihilation. And you, Hunter” —he pointed an accusing finger— “are a damned slip, a very dangerous slip.”

Ikai swallowed and tried to stay calm. Lord Hunter Osvan rose to his feet and came over to Ikai in his turn. He was a tall, solidly-built man five fingers taller than Ikai himself. His hair was black and curly and his thick beard the same color. But most of all, he was strong, very strong. They called him the Black Bear. Ikai had heard many stories about him, none of them good. He was as bloodthirsty as the Regent, and enjoyed subjugating the population. He was capable of chopping off a poor man’s head for a mere glance, badly interpreted.

“Not only a slip,” roared Osvan, “a dishonor and a stain which will be extremely difficult to clean before the Eyes. Never before has a Hunter broken the law. You’ve brought dishonor to my house, to your Master, who will have to pay for this effrontery.”

“Master Sejof has nothing to do with this. It’s my doing, mine alone.”

The Lord Hunter reached for his sword. “I would gladly pierce your heart right now, you worm!”

Sesmok held him back. “Steady, I don’t want him to die… yet.”

Ikai knew then with brutal certainty, as if a mallet had hit him in the face, that he was going to die. There was no hope.

“Before that, I want the young Hunter to explain what happened in the forbidden quadrant. Because something did happen, something out of the ordinary…”

Ikai considered his answer and replied neutrally: “I went in to look for my sister.”

“Why did you go in there? Who told you where to look?”

“Nobody,” Ikai lied, his face a mask of impenetrability, “I went there because the Enforcers took her away and they’re said to dwell in that quadrant.”

“By the Holy Gods! He lies with outstanding ease,” said the High Priest Torkem.

Ikai shivered at the accusation, but hid it as best he could. Sesmok laughed: a cavernous, cynical laugh.

“Yes, my dear High Priest, he lies very well for one so young.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Our dear religious leader is a man of exceptional qualities, not only for his pure oratory and his skill at convincing the masses, but because he is able to detect a lie in a man nine times out of ten.”

Ikai glanced aside at the High Priest, who gave him an accusing look.

“What happened inside? And you’d better begin to tell me the truth or else I’ll have you skinned in strips. And believe me, it’s a sight I’ll enjoy.”

Ikai breathed deeply and nodded. “I slipped into the forbidden quadrant. I avoided the Executors on guard and went into the dungeons.”

Osvan and Torkem exchanged a worried look.

“Did you reach the dungeons?” Sesmok asked in surprise.

Ikai nodded.

“And what happened down there?”

“I found some prisoners who told me my sister was no longer there. I left before I was discovered.”

Sesmok grabbed Ikai’s face with his hand and squeezed hard. In his eyes was the unmistakable gleam of rage. “You’re making me lose my patience, and that’s not good news for you at all. Stop lying, or I’ll cut out your guts and make you eat them.” He squeezed Ikai’s face so hard the boy thought he was going to crush it. He bore the furious attack stoically. Sesmok let go of his face and smiled sarcastically. “Very well, if you don’t want to tell me then I can do nothing for your sister… What was her name?”

Ikai straightened. “Kyra, her name is Kyra…” he replied. He knew it was a trap, yet he had no choice but to play along with it.

“Ah, Kyra, nice name. If you want me to help you, you’ll have to help me first. Tell me what really happened and I’ll see what I can do for your

sister. And you'd better stop lying. I know something happened. Two Eyes-of-the-Gods demanded an audience with me this morning. They told me about an incident in the dungeons, an extremely serious incident. They're looking for someone who went into the forbidden quadrant last night. They've threatened me… *me*! Why have they threatened me? Not just because you broke the law by entering their jurisdiction, no, it's something more. What happened?"

Ikai weighed up his options. If he remained silent they would torture him until he either talked or died, and in his present state he would not last long. If he talked, perhaps he would learn something about Kyra's whereabouts. The three men watched him expectantly, while the tension grew with every slow moment.

"Nothing else happened. It's just as I've told you, my lord," Ikai lied. If he talked, Sesmok would kill him, since he would be of no further use. Even if the High Priest gave him information about Kyra, he would not be able to do anything with it if he was dead.

"He's lying!" Torkem said.

Osvan unsheathed his sword. "The damned rat!" he burst out.

Sesmok smiled. "The boy is smart," he said cynically. "Unfortunately for you, I'm smarter. I don't know what's happened, but something has greatly upset the Enforcers. And I have to suppress this matter before it comes to public notice. It represents a risk I can't allow myself. The Eyes want your head, but if I give it to them this business will drag me into it. You're a Hunter in my service and you've broken the law of the Gods, and who knows what other sins you may have committed. No, I can't let this matter smear me, I won't put myself at risk."

"He'll talk with a bit of torture," Torkem said. "Leave it to me. You know very well my skill at these tasks, my lord… I can guarantee he'll talk."

Sesmok gave Ikai a searching look. "All right, you have till dawn. If he hasn't talked by then, kill him and throw him into the pit. I don't want him to live, I won't take any risks."

Torkem rubbed his hands together. "Very well, my lord, it shall be done."

Sesmok turned to Ikai. "It's nothing personal, I hope you understand. It's for the good of the people." He gave a sarcastic smile, which pierced

Ikai like a poisoned dagger.

Hours later Ikai opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep, overcome by exhaustion, sinking into the depths of a dark abyss. He looked around restlessly. He was in a massive, gloomy hall, lit by two oil lamps. He remembered then that he had been dragged to the flamboyant Temple of the Gods of the capital, not far from the Regent's palace. He was in one of the great chambers which made up the cellars of the sacred building. He tried to get up, but his feet and hands were strapped to a table.

The door of the room opened with a creak and the High Priest Torkem came in. With him was a man dressed in a purple robe: he was large, and his face was both stern and disagreeable. He looked like an enormous orangutan. Behind them he saw Istas, and with him Captain Liriana and five Escort Guards. When he saw them all Ikai felt fear creeping up his throat, as though a snake were seeking his neck to bite him and inject its poison.

Torkem came to stand by his side and smiled. "As I'm a good-hearted man, I'm going to give you one more chance to confess what really happened. The Regent wants to know what has enraged the Eyes so much, and one way or another you're going to tell me."

"Tell them what they wish to know, Ikai," Istas advised him. "There's no need for this."

Ikai's eyes turned to the Commander of the Guard. "What are your orders, Istas? Tell me they haven't ordered you to kill me as soon as I talk."

The Commander remained silent.

"How can you obey their orders? You know the truth about their evil and corruption. They're no better than the Gods they serve. They don't care about the people, they don't care about you or me, they're only defending their own interests, nothing more. Don't you see how they live like kings while the people die of hunger? Don't you see their palaces, their luxuries, the opulence and waste while thousands and thousands suffer? All under the excuse of serving the Gods, of ruling over us for our own good. It's all a massive lie. They starve us, they take away our loved ones."

Torkem struck him in the face. “Shut up, you fool!” he shouted. “The Commander of the Guard knows his duty perfectly well. And he’ll carry it out for the wellbeing of his family.” He glowered and pointed accusingly at the officer’s chest.

Istas lowered his eyes and did not say a word.

“This little angel is Orgel,” Torkem said, introducing his torturer with a grin of satisfaction. “Not just big and ugly, but efficient when it comes to gathering information from whoever it may be. Go ahead, delve deep. Let me know when he starts talking.” The High Priest turned to the door. As he passed Istas he whispered in his ear:

“If he doesn’t talk, cut his throat.”

The Commander of the Guard nodded in silence.

Orgel took out his butcher’s knife, slit Ikai’s tunic to expose his chest and smiled with evil glee as he cut along his right pectoral. Ikai grunted with pain and tried to twist free with all his strength, but Orgel crashed his enormous fist into his cheek. He felt as if he had been hit with a club. Orgel laughed and tried to cut him again, but Ikai twisted to one side. He received another tremendous hammer-punch. Dizziness overcame him. He tried not to lose consciousness, since he guessed that if he did he would never recover. Dizzy, with his vision blurred, he threw a glance at Istas begging for help. The Commander of the Guard went on watching the scene impassively. He would not help him. He was afraid. Like everybody else.

Ikai understood that he was lost. He was about to give up when a movement caught his eye. One of the Guards behind Istas had unsheathed his sword. A quick flash of lamplight on the moving steel revealed a deft stroke to the neck of a second Guard. Ikai could not understand the blurred sequence of events he was watching. It made no sense. His mind had to be wrong.

Istas turned and took a step back, unsheathing his sword as he did so. “Treason!” he shouted. The other three Guards drew their weapons. Orgel turned and faced the attack.

Istas pointed with his sword. “Liriana, watch out! Treason!” The Captain stepped forward and with a swift stroke killed another Guard. Istas was dumbfounded. “What? What the hell is this?” he cried in disbelief.

Liriana pointed her sword at him. “I can’t let you kill him, Istas. I need the Hunter.”

“Liriana! Stop! This is crazy!” Istas cried, unable to accept that someone would dare rise against the established regime, against him.

Liriana directed her sword at the two other Guards. She glanced at the one who had first shed blood. “I’m your Captain. Join me and you won’t die here today. Asgos is with me.”

The two Guards stared at her undecidedly.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s crazy! Nobody stands up to the Regent, nobody! This is high treason! You’ll all die and you’ll condemn your families as well with this act. Sesmok will put them to the knife, every one of them! Think about it, by all that’s most sacred!”

The two Guards looked at Liriana, then at Istas. They took their places beside the Commander.

Liriana sighed. “Let it be.”

Istas and the two Guards readied themselves. They flexed their bodies and brought their swords to bear. Facing them Liriana and Asgos stood at the ready, determination and courage reflected in their intense gaze. And all the time Orgel waited at the far end expectantly. A tense silence fell on the chamber. For a second nobody moved. And the next moment, steel flashed.

Liriana lunged like a panther at one of the Guards and with a feint followed by a straight thrust pierced his armor at the groin. Istas swore and launched a stroke at her head, while Asgos and the other Guard joined in a fierce combat. Liriana tried to dodge the stroke with amazing agility, but Istas’ sword cut her in the arm. She counter attacked with a sword-thrust at the Commander’s leg, forcing him to leap to one side to avoid the blow. Asgos took a cut in the shoulder, although he managed to kill his rival with a cut to the neck. But before he could recover, the torturer was on him. Istas was fighting with amazing skill, the result of years of training. Liriana younger but less experienced in swordsmanship, defended herself like a tigress.

Ikai wrenched with all his might at the bonds which held him tight. His dizziness had vanished. He had to get free to help them!

Asgos dodged Orgel’s vicious attack by skipping aside at the last moment, then ran to Ikai.

“Keep still!” he said, and raised his arm. The sword fell in a flash. Ikai closed his eyes and felt the blow on the bonds on his wrist. Asgos struck again and his arm was free.

“Look out!” cried Ikai as he saw Orgel throw himself on Asgos’ back. The Guard turned swiftly and mortally wounded Orgel with a powerful thrust. But the torturer, taking advantage of his momentum, stabbed him in the throat with a tremendous blow from his butcher’s knife. Asgos fell and died amid spasms. Orgel stumbled backwards, stopped and took another knife from his belt. With the eyes of one possessed, he came towards Ikai to kill him.

Ikai tugged at his bonds, but could not free his other hand. With his free one he felt desperately around him. Orgel stumbled to the table and bent over him, then raised his arm with the ominous knife in his hand. With a sharp, brutal blow, Ikai jabbed a pair of red-hot tweezers in his eye. With a grunt of surprise, the giant fell dead on top of him.

Liriana was retreating. Istas had cut her twice and she was losing blood. She counterattacked fiercely, but his technique was superior. With a feint and a master-twist of his wrist, he disarmed the young Captain.

“It’s time to die and pay for this treason!” he said and drew his arm back, ready to pierce her through.

“No!” Shouted Ikai. This was followed by a hollow blow.

Istas’s body arched. The butcher’s knife was stuck deep in his neck.

Ikai, standing beside the table with his arm still outstretched from the throw, watched him fall.

“You’ll die… all of you…” Istas gurgled. “Your families will die…”

“Maybe so, but not today.” Liriana said.

“I’m sorry…” murmured Ikai, but Istas had already set out on the journey with no return.

Liriana picked up her sword again. “Thank you. You’re very good with a throwing knife.” She turned her big turquoise eyes on Ikai’s. “We’d better get out of here before Torkem comes back,” she said. “We’re in danger, and I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Why?” Ikai asked in confusion. “Why risk yourselves for me? Asgos is dead… for me? Why? I don’t understand.”

“There’s no time for explanations. He didn’t die for you, he died for something much more important, for an ideal, a dream.” Liriana knelt by the body of the brave soldier and put her hand in the blood around his head. She closed her eyes and said a brief prayer. With her hand soaked in blood,

she went to the wall and pressed her palm against the white surface. When she took it away the mark of a red hand was printed on the wall. Ikai remembered that image.

“Can you walk?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Good. Grab your things and follow me, let’s get out of here.”

Ikai hesitated for an instant.

“There’s a lot you don’t know. Come with me if you want to find out.”

“Where will we go? They’ll send the whole Guard after us.”

“I’m not worried about the Guard. What worries me is the Executors.”

She turned and left through the door.

Ikai took a deep breath.

There’s no way back.

14

From the deck of the ship, lost in wonder, Kyra stared at the immensity of the city which rose magnificently till it was lost in the clouds. Beside her Idana and Yosane did not even blink. Their minds were trying in vain to take in the splendor, majesty and unbelievable architectural beauty in front of them. They had just docked at a pier full of ships and frantic activity. Kyra watched merchandise and slaves being unloaded. Executors and Eyes made their presence felt everywhere.

Idana's gaze was lost among the endless buildings and monuments. "It looks… like crystal," she said. "The whole city… all made of… glass…"

"It can't be glass," Yosane pointed out. "It wouldn't hold the weight. It has to be some other kind of material we don't know about, I can see white marble in a lot of the foundations."

Kyra swept the city with a glance. She too had the impression of a wonderful city of crystal, for all the buildings and monuments were translucent and gleamed when the sun touched them. The streets of the harbor were of white marble and the houses were totally clear, like glass. She thought of throwing a stone at one of the buildings to see what happened, but the presence of the Executors behind her restrained her.

"It's an optical effect," Yosane said. She pointed to her right. "Look there, that huge warehouse in the middle of the harbor. You see how men and goods go into the building, but once they're inside they disappear? The building looks transparent and yet it isn't, we can't see what's inside. I don't know what material or mineral it is, or how they manage to make the whole city look so transparent. It's absolutely unbelievable and wonderful. You could say they've tried to make it look almost ethereal… If my father was here he'd die of joy."

While she listened to the explanation, Kyra stared at that colossal mountain-city on the sea. Superb palaces and mansions, opulent monuments, fountains and statues, exotic gardens, all in exquisite taste, had been built around the mountain at different levels. She saw that the side of the mountain ended at the great circular harbor which seemed to enclose it

completely at sea-level. At the top she could see the most magnificent of the palaces, which appeared to float over the mountain itself. From its center a Monolith seemed to rise, so huge Kyra could not even begin to gauge its height, since it seemed to disappear into the skies. It must have been several times bigger than the one they had seen on the island.

The architecture isn't just beautiful, it's very advanced," Yosane said in ecstasy. "There are all sorts of elaborate spheres and ovals, which would be unthinkable in our own buildings. They're simple and rectangular. How I'd love to learn the concepts behind buildings like that!"

"It looks unreal," Idana said in puzzlement. "How do they stay up without falling?"

"Exactly! Even the bridges across the five rings are too elaborate and advanced for us to understand. It can only be the work of the Gods."

"Perhaps the design is, but the work is all done by slaves," Idana said. She pointed to her left, where hundreds of slaves were pulling a statue with ropes to raise it into place. "Look there, further on." She pointed to a flat area where close to a thousand men were dragging and lifting huge blocks of that translucent material, building what looked as if it was going to be another palace. "There are slaves everywhere. Wherever I look I see nothing but slaves working on roads, buildings, ships. There are thousands of them." She sighed deeply.

"This is where they bring them when they're summoned, to work on their damned Eternal City," Kyra said angrily. "Don't be fooled by its beauty and its air of divine splendor. It's the city of the Gods, and all that's awaiting us here is pain and slavery, or something worse… much worse. Look at them, look how they suffer under the whip of the pitiless Enforcers of the Gods."

In silence they watched the slaves. The whips of the Oppressors cracked in the air and the slaves pulled the enormous blocks with all their might as the whips found their battered backs. A heavy, sorrowful silence enveloped them.

Yosane was the first to break it. She was looking in the opposite direction. "That's weird" she commented. Kyra and Idana turned to follow her gaze. "The buildings in the second ring, the closest to the mountain-city, aren't glass. They're solid, mostly deep reds and oranges. What's more, it's the middle of the day and there are hundreds of fires lit in both streets and

buildings. They even seem to be decorative… If you look closely there are fountains and cataracts of… of what looks like lava…”

“Yes, you’re right, it’s weird,” Idana said. “Even more so if you compare it with the outermost ring, where all the buildings and structures were bluish and water was everywhere.”

Kyra shook her head. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. But I’m sure the city of the Gods is that mountain over there.” She pointed at the great peak.

“I wouldn’t like to contradict you, my friend…” Yosane began, and shrugged.

“But…”

“But I think the city is really made up of the five rings. We’ve crossed it and right now we’re at the very center of the Eternal City, in its heart.”

“In the wolf’s den, more likely,” Kyra said dryly. “Stay alert, the worst is yet to come.”

An Eye-of-the-God came on board and the three were silent at once. He joined the two Eyes in charge of the ship and they fell into conversation. The three then took out their books and wrote in them. The new Eye wore the same sinister helmet as the other two, but his clothes were slightly more refined, with a silver sash at his waist. He came towards the group, and the Executors moved away at once.

“On your knees, slaves!” he ordered.

Under the impulse of fear they all obeyed. Kyra hesitated for a moment with her blood boiling, but she would gain nothing from a confrontation with the Eye and her body was aching from the beating she had received. She knelt. The Eye-of-the-God walked into the middle of the group of prisoners and took out a small disc from a hidden pocket. He stretched out his hand with the disc on his palm, then closed his hand over it and opened it once again. A flash of lightning issued from the disc and struck the Rings of half the girls, among them Lian and Urda. Instantly the flash ran through their bodies. They began to convulse uncontrollably and fell to the ground in a swoon. Idana cried out, fearful and helpless. Yosane threw a glance of pure terror at Kyra. The Eye stepped forward, avoiding the bodies on the ground, and stopped in front of Yosane, Idana and Kyra.

Kyra spat at his feet. “Someday you’ll pay for all this!”

A strident guffaw came from under the helmet. “I seriously doubt it, you stupid slave,” he replied, and slapped her face hard.

Kyra endured the blow and looked at him defiantly. “You’ll pay!” she said.

The Eye-of-the-God activated his disc and the discharge hit them, entering their bodies through the Rings. One by one they collapsed amid terrible convulsions.

Kyra had woken up with a volcano about to erupt in the middle of her chest. She was raging within. She pushed the bars of the imprisoning sphere with all her strength, ignoring the warnings from her bruised body.

“Swine! Bloody heartless vermin!”

“It’s useless, Kyra,” Yosane said from the next sphere. “You won’t be able to force it.”

But Kyra, blind with rage, only wanted to get out of there and pull the head off the first Eye who crossed her path.

“Stop struggling and making so much noise,” Lian protested from another sphere-cell. “If they come, you’ll only get us punished!”

Idana, imprisoned in a sphere in front of Kyra’s, put her arms through the bars.

“Hold back, Kyra, you’ll hurt yourself. Your body has already had enough punishment. Stop it, or else you’ll never manage to get out of here.”

Hearing her friend’s warning, Kyra thought again. She needed to be whole if she was going to escape from there. And she would, somehow. She would do it! She calmed down.

Hours went by. In the gloom of the chamber, tension and restlessness grew among the prisoners. The twelve were becoming increasingly aware that they were at the end of the road.

“What’s going to happen to us?” asked Lirune. She was one of the three girls who had been punished by the Enforcers.

“Where are we?” Jismen wanted to know. Her voice trembled with fear.

“What are they going to do to us?” they heard Mira ask. She was the youngest of all.

Kyra had no answer to give them. But the chamber gave her the creeps; very badly. It was round, and the sphere-cells were arranged so as to form a complete circle. One for each. The exact number. It was for them, it was the end of their journey. They had been waiting for them. She did not need Yosane’s frightened face to confirm it. She had come to that conclusion by herself.

A door opened, and the shadowy room was filled with light. An Eye entered the hall, followed by four Executors. The prisoners fell silent, stifling sobs and whimpers. The Eye pointed at Yosane’s sphere. Two of the Executors brought her out of it.

“No, please, leave her alone,” Idana begged.

The Eye pointed at Idana. “Shut up, slave!” he ordered. He turned to Yosane, who was shaking with pure terror. “Undress her!” he called.

The Executors tore Yosane’s clothes, then ripped them off her.

The prisoners cried out in horror. Yosane tried desperately to hold on to a piece of cloth and broke into sobs.

“Don’t touch her, you pigs!” Kyra shouted in outrage.

“Take her to the Lord, he awaits his tribute,” the Eye said to the Executors.

They seized Yosane’s arms and legs and carried her out, totally naked and sobbing desperately.

“Leave her! You gutless beasts! I’ll kill you all!” Kyra shouted.

The Eye turned to her and threatened her with a bony ochre finger.

“Shut up, peasant, or I’ll cut your tongue out!”

“Take me in her place,” Idana offered in desperation.

The Eye turned his eyes on her. “Don’t you worry, slave,” he said in his jarring voice. “Your turn will come.” He sounded almost jocose.

The Enforcers left the chamber, and the door closed behind them. Twilight fell on the girls once more.

“Noooooooo! Bastards!” Kyra shouted at the top of her lungs.

The weeping and whimpering began anew.

“I’ll kill them! I swear I’ll kill them all!” Kyra shouted. She struggled with the bars like one possessed until she was exhausted.

“What will they do with her?” Idana asked. No sooner had she spoken that she realized the obvious answer. She fell silent.

“What do you think they’re going to do with her?” Lian said. “They’re taking her naked as tribute to their lord…”

“Shut up, don’t say it!” Kyra cried. She needed to deny the evidence.

But Lian, in her arrogance, ignored her warning. “They’ll rape her. That’s what they’ve brought us here for, so their lords can have their fun with us as much as they want.”

“Shut up or I’ll kick your teeth in!”

“A dozen young slaves… What else do you think they’d want us for?”

“Lian…” Urda interrupted her.

Lian glared at her friend, folded her arms and said no more.

The sobbing of deep despair filled the chamber.

It was not long before the Enforcer of the Gods came back. The door opened and everyone started nervously.

“You,” the Eye said to Kyra. “It’s your turn. Our Lord claims you.”

Kyra looked at him defiantly. She would not let him see her cry, nor the fear she felt. She was not going to give him that satisfaction. He would only see the hatred in her heart blazing out of her eyes. The Executors took her out of the cell and held her fast. Kyra made an attempt to resist when they laid their hands on her, but it was useless. They were too strong. Her clothes were torn off her in the middle of the room. Idana stifled a cry.

“Take me!” she offered again, arms outstretched. “Take me!”

But she was ignored. The Executors seized Kyra by her arms and legs and carried her out. Kyra did not know how long she was carried, since she could not control her rage. It overwhelmed her, clouding her reason. She was going to be raped! She would not allow it! She kicked and writhed all she could, but the four Executors had a firm grip on her wrists and ankles.

They went into another chamber and left her on the cold floor. She was about to stand up when the Eye used his disc. A terrible shock passed through her Ring and she fell amid convulsions. She was left lying, with no strength left whatsoever, in pure agony. But she did not faint. The Eye and the Executors moved a few steps away, and Kyra tried to swim on the sea of pain she was drowning in. Reflected light hurt her pupils and she looked away. It came from the walls of the hall: they were of shining silver, ornamented with gold. Unintelligible runes and mystical symbols decorated them up to the lofty dome, where the representation of the sun radiated an almost divine radiance. It bounced off the walls, which reflected it in all directions. Kyra covered her eyes with her forearm and fought to bear the pain. She clenched her fists tight, and for a long while she did not move. At last the pain faded and she breathed in deeply, filling her lungs so that she could exhale slowly and steadily. She felt a little better.

She stood up slowly and looked around. She froze. The Eye and the Executors were kneeling on the floor, arms and heads touching it, prostrate in absolute submission. And then she saw it. In front of her. Hovering in the air, at a crazy height, surrounded by a strange nebulous substance which seemed to emanate from its own body. A being as rare as it was unmistakable.

A Golden God!

Kyra closed her eyes tightly in utter amazement. She shook her head and opened them wide again. He was still there, floating in the air in front of her, watching her. It was impossible! The Gods were a myth; that was what she had always believed. They were no more than devilish figures invented by the oppressors to frighten the people into slavery. That was what she had always told herself, no matter how much the Proxies, High Priests, Regents, and Eyes preached. The Gods did not exist! Kyra rubbed her eyes and looked again at the strange being who was watching her silently from the heights. Kyra gave him her full attention, her eyes wide open, scrutinizing him from head to toe, not missing the least detail.

The God descended slowly, without any apparent effort, until he settled softly in front of her. He made no sound at all. She tried to swallow, but she could barely so much as breathe from the shock. The being looked human, but he was extremely slender, too slender for a man. He was very tall, a head taller than Ikai, who was quite tall himself. His arms and legs were

graceful and sinewy at the same time. He was neither broad-shouldered nor muscular but he radiated strength and magnetism.

Kyra's attention was caught by his head. He was clean-shaven, with no sign of facial (or body) hair. His eyes were large and almond-shaped, a bluish gray as clear as the combination of the sea and mist which had accompanied their arrival in that strange kingdom. His mouth was finely-drawn, with slightly prominent lips. The complexion of cheeks, chin and forehead was so delicate it gave the whole face an exquisite beauty which was almost other-worldly. Kyra had never seen anything so striking. Yet what left her completely speechless was not his beauty but his skin.

It was golden. All of it.

It was a dark shade, which shone like old gold. Kyra swallowed. She could not take her eyes off the God. She could not say how old he might be, for his face looked ageless. All the same, her impression was of someone around twenty-five, not much more, even though there was an aura of eternity about him. The feeling made her shiver; it was unnatural. He wore a long white robe with silver trimming and over it armor made of golden scales, which covered him from neck to thighs and shone intensely. His limbs were covered with greaves and gauntlets, also of gold. From his shoulders fell a white cloak, almost transparent.

Kyra was so lost in wonder that she did not realize her eyes were fixed on this being, half God, half warrior, both sublime and mystical. Suddenly Kyra felt as if something had bumped against her mind. Instinctively she drew her head back. But the blow had not been physical. An unknown force bumped against her mind once again, and the mental blow nearly made her lose her balance.

What the hell! she thought in confusion, trying not to fall.

A cold, distant voice echoed in her head.

Your name, slave.

Disconcerted, Kyra looked at the God and saw that his mouth was closed. The fine lips had not moved. He was not speaking, yet she could hear him.

"Are you… are you talking to me… in my head?"

The Eye-of-the-God glared at her from the floor.

"How dare you! Show respect, you filthy slave!"

The Golden God waved his hand. The Eye was immediately quiet. He kept his head down and his forehead on the floor.

Yes, slave, I am the one speaking to you.

“What are you… a God?”

For you and your race, I am, yes.

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked in an unsteady voice.

The spell had been broken. She was beginning to see this being for what he really was under that slender beauty and that gold and olive skin: a ruthless enslaver, rapist of helpless women. Fear crept up her stomach with fiery claws until it reached her throat.

You will soon find out.

She looked around desperately, without finding any trace of her friend. “And Yosane?” she asked. “What have you done with her? Where is she?”

I see you do not know your place, slave. Be quiet and do as you are told. Nothing else should concern you.

As she heard the veiled threat, Kyra looked down at her naked body in the middle of the chamber in the presence of that being and his minions, and realized how helpless and exposed she was. She covered her private parts with arms and hands and threw a defiant glare at the God who was interrogating her, entering her head without permission, playing with her mind. She felt humiliated, soiled and deeply vulnerable. Never before in her life had she felt this way. She could bear the whip, insults, blows, even agonizing pain, but this was worse. Much worse.

“She’d better be safe and unharmed.”

Do you dare threaten me, slave? This is something I have never before experienced.

“I’m not threatening. I’m just saying.”

You are in no position to demand anything. I asked for your name, slave.

Kyra said nothing, simply glaring with visceral hatred at the golden being.

I see you are not like the others. That pleases me.

Kyra saw that his mouth still had not moved, but something had changed in the expression on the golden face. It was the eyes. They had shone with something she did not like at all: the gleam of satisfaction.

No, no, no! she said to herself. Her fear had now turned into pure fury.

Kneel before your God and master.

Kyra could keep back her anger no longer, and exploded like a volcano. She made as if to kneel, but instead of bending her knee she leapt forward towards the God. The Eye and the Executors had no time to react. Kyra drove herself forward with all the strength of her legs and reached the God in the blink of an eye. She clenched her fist to hit that being, who was watching her without any expression on his golden face.

She reached the God and drew her arm back to hit, blinded by fury. At the same instant the God's lips moved. A sound reached Kyra's ears, something like a lugubrious chant. A flash of intense light, almost transparent, hit her eyes, and she now witnessed the scene as if time had stood still and everything was happening in slow motion. Kyra's fist moved towards the golden face, then her eyes saw the source of the light. It was a crystalline disc the God was holding in his left hand.

What the hell is that? she thought.

But it was too late. An arcane mist surrounded the body of the God, forming a translucent sphere. As it did so, time began to run normally again and things speeded up. Kyra's fist advanced towards her target, but instead it hit the sphere. Pain exploded in her mind and a heartbeat later, carried on by her own momentum, her whole body crashed against the protective sphere. The blow was brutal, and she bounced backwards. She lay there on the floor, writhing with pain.

What was that? What happened? I had him, what he just did is impossible! Her body, and her hand in particular, hurt so much she could hardly think. *He's used… some Power… Hell!*

The Executors surrounded her immediately and their spears reached for her neck. But for some reason they stopped a finger's-breadth from her throat. They did not kill her. On the floor, lying on her back with the spears at her throat, Kyra watched the Executors, who seemed to be stoically awaiting their order. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard, and the cold floor bit into her naked body.

My intuition was correct, you are very different from the others.

"Get out of my head, you pig!"

Nobody has ever tried anything like that before. Certainly surprising. You have guts, slave.

“Stop calling me slave! My name is Kyra and I swear you’ll remember this.”

Kyra… I will remember... be sure of that.

Suddenly the spears moved back and she was in the midst of the Executors.

“Prepare her,” the Eye ordered.

Iron hands seized her, digging into her flesh like the claws of a bird of prey, and lifted her off the floor brusquely.

“Let me go, you filthy brutes!” Kyra shouted. “I’ll kill you all! I swear I’ll kill you all!”

Two Executors carried her away, while she resisted violently. She felt the pain of the struggle, she was hurting herself in the futile attempt to resist, but she did not care. She would not let the being touch her. Never! She would sooner die first!

They took her to an adjoining chamber. A door opened, and Kyra found herself in a curious triangular room. The walls were an intense red and the floor black as night. In the middle was a silver sphere with runes engraved all over its surface. Beside the sphere two Eyes wearing red sashes over their tunics waited with open books in their hands. The scene gave Kyra the creeps, a chill ran down her spine.

What the hell is this? Kyra was even more confused. “What are you going to do to me?” she yelled.

But nobody answered. They put her in the sphere and closed the transparent hatch. For a moment nobody moved. Kyra became even more nervous. What were they waiting for? Then she saw it. The Golden God was slowly approaching the sphere from the entrance of the chamber. He seemed to be gliding above the floor. Kyra’s flesh prickled as she saw him approach. This being gave out an essence of great mystical power. She could feel it in every pore, that arcane power and the danger which came with it. For a moment she thought he could kill her just by wishing it. Perhaps that would be the case. For the first time in her life her fighting heart failed her: she found herself shrinking before the omnipotent presence of the God.

No, no, no, I’ll fight to my last breath, she thought, gathering courage from the depths of her soul.

Do not resist, it will be less painful. The mental blow surprised her, as she was inside the sphere and was not expecting it. She realized the God was so powerful he could probably transmit his thoughts over distance and through objects. This intimidated her even more, but she clenched her fists and prepared to go on fighting.

Survive and escape, she reminded herself. *Ikai, where are you, my brother? I need you.* Then she thought how far away, lost and hopeless she was, how powerful the enemies around her were, and she thought better of it. *Don't come, brother, only death awaits you here. Don't come for me.*

A substance began to envelop her inside the sphere. It was bluish, like ocean-tinted smoke. It enveloped her completely and for a moment she thought she would no longer be able to breathe, that she would drown.

"What are you going to do to me?" she yelled at the Golden God.

But he did not answer, only watched her with that air of superiority, of divine power. The substance filled the sphere, although she could still breathe. She began to feel strange, sleepy, relaxed, even though she knew she was in danger. The sphere gave off a series of golden flashes which filled the chamber. At that moment she heard a metallic sound and felt a sharp sting on the soles of her feet.

"Bastards!" she swore. But she was so tired and the substance was so welcoming and pleasant that she gave in to it. She lost awareness of where she was and what was going on. The sphere radiated again: silver rays this time.

Kyra, the slave. Be sure I shall remember your daring.

There was loathing in the glare Kyra turned on him.

The God smiled.

My name is Adamis, he said, drawing out the word. *Remember later, for I am your God, and your life and that of all your companions is in my hands.*

And Kyra fainted.

15

Ikai crouched in the midst of the reeds, hiding in the shadows of the night, accompanied by the discordant croaking of frogs. The moon reigned overhead, high and beautiful, escorted by thousands of tiny brilliant stars, like a Goddess watching protectively over her sleeping people after a long day of toil.

A few paces behind him he could hear the singing murmur of the river. The sound of the stream always calmed him, he felt lulled to sleep by its intangible watery arms. It was no surprise; after all, he was one of the Senoca, the People of the Sea, or who had once been. Now all they had was the memory and the river. He touched his right leg and ran his hand over the blue tattoo there: a radiant sun above a calm sea. It was discreet in comparison to the more elaborate, extensive kind that some wore. But he liked it, and in any case he had never been one to call attention to himself.

Suddenly the frogs fell silent. Someone was coming. Slowly, muffling all sound, he drew his sword and dagger and readied himself. He listened hard and heard furtive footsteps on the damp surface to his right. He was sure they could not see him, since the reeds surrounded him in all directions, hiding his presence except towards the river. He turned slowly with the dagger in his right hand, ready to launch. The steps were louder now. The reeds parted. A soldier appeared in front of him, sword in hand. Ikai's arm was ready to carry out the act, but his brain did not give the order.

"Wait!" he heard suddenly. The soldier stopped three paces away with his hand raised. Large turquoise eyes, wide open in horror, were staring at him from under the helmet.

Ikai recognized those eyes, and the voice. It was not a soldier, it was an officer: Liriana. Slowly he lowered his arm and nodded at her. The Captain gave a long, deep sigh. She came closer to him.

"You almost got me there!" she protested in a whisper.

Ikai watched the eyes come closer. They shone intensely. They were large and attractive. “You make a lot of noise,” Ikai scolded her.

“I’m an officer, not a bloody Hunter. Subtlety isn’t my strong point.”

Ikai nodded. “What’s the plan?”

“The whole city is in a state of alert. The Regent wants our heads at any price. High Priest Torkem is haranguing the masses to encourage them to give us up. The Guard is searching for us house by house and the Executors are going over the outskirts and the nearby villages. We haven’t many options. We’re in a tight fix.”

“You said you could get help… that you had friends…”

Liriana nodded. “It’s not all lost. We’re still alive, aren’t we?”

“If we don’t move they’ll find us, believe me, you can bet on that,” said Ikai. He could see the lights of the capital behind the trees to the south.

“I’ve managed to arrange a meeting, and it wasn’t easy, they almost arrested me. Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Don’t ask so many questions. Just follow me.”

Liriana moved along the river towards the north among the reeds. The girl was certainly not used to stealth. What with her officer’s armor and her heavy tread Ikai had the feeling they would be detected a league away at least. Some clouds crossed the moon and the shadows closed in around them. He sighed in relief. They might be heard, but at least they would not be seen. They went on for more than an hour, with the water now reaching their knees.

“We’re there,” Liriana whispered.

Ikai looked up and saw a typical Senoca building: a flattened stone pyramid. One of its faces gave on to a small wooden pier. The building was painted black, and on the wall he could make out the representation of the sea, and death. *The Last Gate*, he thought in dismay, *how appropriate…* This was the ritual building where they celebrated the ceremony of the journey of no return to the ocean beyond. It was an ancient tradition of his people. A tradition kept up from a better time, when they were free… The dead man was placed in a simple boat, together with some of his belongings for the journey, and his family said their goodbyes in an intimate ceremony. *From the mother sea we come, and to her immensity we return.* For an

instant the idea even appealed to him. To lie down in that simple vessel, relaxed, and let the current of the great river take him away, never to return. All his problems would end. But Kyra's face appeared in his mind. *I can't give up and abandon her. I have to go on, no matter how difficult the situation might be.*

He shook off this feeling of defeat and walked on to the building. It was not a good omen to be there, it was a funereal place, but it was certainly a good one to hide in, at least from the Guards. The Executors were another matter altogether. The door was always open, and they went in. Liriana guided him in the dark without any light. She seemed to know the place well. Ikai could barely make out anything in the blackness inside. He heard a creaking: wood being moved.

"Down below," Liriana said, and disappeared.

Ikai moved forward and saw the trapdoor Liriana had gone down. He followed her and closed it over his head. They went down a flight of stone stairs, and he glimpsed a light ahead at the end of a corridor.

"Here we are," Liriana announced.

The Captain opened a door at the end and light fell on them with dazzling brilliance. Ikai covered his eyes and put his hand to the pommel of his sword.

Liriana went into the room. "Come on in, she assured him. "There's no danger."

He waited a moment to let his eyes get used to the light, then took a quick glance inside. He saw a man sitting at a table in the center, with two men flanking him and two more at the far end of the room. They all wore simple robes and looked like peasants, but for some reason they wore hoods and their faces were hidden. He did not like this. Farmers were not in the habit of hiding their faces under hoods, least of all inside a place of worship, and he had the feeling that these men were something more than weathered sons of the soil. Slowly, he reached behind him for his throwing dagger.

Liriana made a sign to him from inside. "Come on, Ikai. They're friends, I swear it."

But he did not trust her. He was grateful to Liriana for saving his life, but he was not going to set foot in a room in a cellar full of hooded strangers. They might belong to the Guard… Was he walking headlong into

a trap? His eyes went to Liriana. He wanted to trust her, but nobody could assure him that she had not been captured and had offered to turn him in to the Guard in exchange for her own life. The men might be trying to hide the fact, but he noticed they were armed: something forbidden, punishable with death. No, he did not like this situation one little bit. He calculated the distance to the way out in case he needed to run.

“Analyzing your choices, young Hunter?” came a voice from inside.

Ikai identified the origin of the voice. It was the man sitting at the table in the middle of the room. He could not see his face, but the voice was strangely familiar.

“Let’s give him a moment. Our young friend tends to calculate his movements very carefully.”

The words disconcerted him. Who was this character? Ikai raised his right arm. “Do you know me by any chance?”

“Ikai, no!” Liriana cried. The men inside all unsheathed knives and short copper swords.

“Lower your arm, Ikai,” the stranger said from his seat at the table. “I know you won’t throw that dagger until you’ve assessed all your options.”

Liriana motioned him to lower his weapon. “Calm down, Ikai…”

“Who are you? And I won’t ask again…” Ikai threatened in a voice that left no doubt.

“An old friend,” the man said. With slow movements he pushed his hood back, revealing a bruised old face, like parchment, beneath snow-white hair which fell to merge with his beard, also white as snow.

Ikai lowered his weapons at once. “Gedrel!” he said in utter surprise.

“It would have been funny if after saving this old man’s life from those outlaws, you were to kill him now,” Gedrel said with a laugh.

Ikai smiled and went into the hall. Gedrel’s face still looked badly bruised from the beating he had received when Ikai rescued him. The wounds made him appear more fragile than he already was. If when he met the old man Ikai had thought he must be around eighty, at that moment under the light of the oil lamp he looked more like a hundred, although he knew it was impossible. Nobody had lived that long for generations. One of the men left the room, closing the door behind him.

“Don’t worry, my nephew is going to check whether you’ve been followed.”

“Your nephew… like the ones who were with you when we met. And I suppose these men here are your kinsfolk too? You must have a really big family.”

Gedrel nodded and gave him a broad smile. “Nothing escapes that analytic mind of yours, does it? Let’s say I have a big *extended* family, yes.” He pointed at the people gathered together in the room and motioned him to a bench on the other side of the table, opposite him. “Sit down, drink a little wine with this crazy old man.”

“As you please,” Ikai said. He was trying to guess what was going on. He certainly knew that Gedrel was no crazy old man: on the contrary. He sat in front of him and they were served two cups from a wine-skin.

“You wouldn’t happen to have some food…? I’m famished, and” —he glanced at the Captain— “I’m sure Liriana is too.”

“We’ve had no time to prepare. Liriana’s warning caught us by surprise. But we did bring a few supplies.” He turned and waved at one of the hooded men at the far end of the room. The man, tall and robust, brought a satchel to the table, where he laid out part of its contents. Ikai hastened to attack the dried meat and cheese he was offered, leaving table manners aside, while his stomach rumbled in gratitude.

Liriana took a seat on a chest to one side. She took off her helmet and put it on the floor between her legs. Until then Ikai had not been able to see her face, only her big turquoise eyes under the helmet. He studied her: she was young, his age or a year older perhaps, tall and strong, with a lithe, sinewy body. She put a piece of cheese in her mouth, and Ikai saw that her features were delicate, her nose fine and her mouth small. But what caught his attention was that she wore her fair hair cut really short. That was usual among the men of the Guard, less so among the women. The haircut was not flattering, but the delicacy of the face and her large eyes made her interesting, even attractive. Ikai could not put his finger on it, but there was something very appealing about her.

Liriana looked at him askance and caught him staring at her. Ikai went red and looked away, but she did not seem to notice and went on eating. Ikai turned back to the food and was particularly grateful for the wine. It

had been a long time since he had had the privilege. A family of farmers like his own could not afford it.

“Eat in peace, young Hunter, and get your strength back,” Gedrel said. “You look awful, even worse than I do myself, and that’s not easy.” He smiled. “I’ve been told you had some trouble with our dear Regent Sesmok… how unfortunate…”

Ikai raised one eyebrow and tried to work out whether the old man was being sarcastic.

“As soon as you’ve finished eating, we’ll take care of those wounds,” Gedrel said. He glanced at Liriana. “I see some badly-bandaged cuts, and you have blood running down your arm, Ikai. Misos is an apothecary, he’ll take care of it.” He indicated one of the men, who had a leather bag at his feet.

“I appreciate it.”

“I guess your delicate situation has something to do with your sister…”

When he heard the subtlety in the old man’s tone and saw the flash of cunning in his eyes, Ikai understood that Liriana’s intervention, his rescue and flight, had not been a coincidence.

Ikai recalled their conversation in the forest clearing, “Gedrel, Merchant for the Gods,” he said, and pointed at the golden Ring on his left wrist. “For men… something very different,” he added, using the old man’s words.

Gedrel smiled. “You have a good memory, my young friend.”

“Who are you really, Gedrel?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer. Not because I want to avoid it, no, not that. You see… I’m different things to many people, very different from what the Gods want me to be: just one more merchant-slave. For some I’m hope, hope for a better world, for a better future for their children. For others I’m only an old dreamer, a poet from some epic tale who’s trying to woo the moon. For almost everybody I’m just a crazy old man with a grandiose dream, a dream of freedom…”

“You certainly know how to talk and not say anything,” Ikai said. He was trying to make the old man stop evading the real question. His reply was not appreciated in the hall, and the men tensed. Gedrel raised his hand to lower the tension.

He pointed at the men around them. “I’ll tell you who I am… for them. I’m the bearer of the seed. The one we have to sow in the hopeless hearts of men so that it can germinate one day and grow strong, looking for the sun, reaching the sky, gaining freedom.”

Ikai stared at the old man. He could guess there was much intelligence and wisdom in him. The pretense of being a crazy old man was just a well-rehearsed performance to fool an unwanted audience. He was beginning to see the old man in a new light.

“That’s a complicated answer…”

“Very well, my young Hunter, let’s talk like the friends we are. I’ll try to explain.”

“I’m not a Hunter any longer, Gedrel, I’m nothing… well, that’s not true, now I’m less than nothing. I’m a Pariah. I’m under sentence of death.”

Gedrel sighed deeply. “Sometimes the extreme difficulty of the path is the very thing which tests our mettle and forces us to do unthinkable actions, to overcome insurmountable obstacles.”

“My only desire is to get my sister back, and yes, the obstacles are gigantic…”

Gedrel’s eyes, deep as the sea, searched Ikai’s soul. “Will you give up, then?” he asked.

Ikai remembered with rending clarity his mother’s desperate plea and the promise he had made her the day he left the village. He shook his head. “I won’t give up, not now, not ever,” he said. “If I must die, so be it, but I won’t give up no matter how big the obstacles may be.”

Gedrel smiled. “Nor will we, no matter how impossible things seem. You see? We’re not so different, you and I.”

Ikai’s eyes noticed a bloodied hand on one of the walls. “What does it mean? Who are you really?”

“We’re the ones who refuse to live a life of slavery. We’re the ones who want their children and their children’s children never to know what it means to be born and die a slave. We’re the ones who are fighting so that one day they can live in freedom, without fear, masters of their own destiny.”

“I’ve heard rumors about you.”

“Not many, I hope. You used to be a Hunter.”

“No, not many, you needn’t worry about that. The Hunters don’t know of your existence, at least for now. The villagers don’t talk to the Hunters.”

“And for a reason,” Liriana put in. “You serve the Regent, and he serves the Eyes-of-the-Gods and their all-powerful Gods.”

Ikai nodded sadly. “I’m not proud of what I was and what I’ve had to do. I’m not sorry either. I had to do what I did for my family.”

Gedrel spread his arms wide, palms up. “Nobody’s judging you, Ikai.”

Ikai swallowed the bitter taste in his throat. “I’ve been judged every single day, with every single glance. I’m used to it. It was Kyra, my sister, who mentioned you.”

“This sister of yours, is she one of ours?” Gedrel asked with interest. He exchanged a quick glance with Liriana.

“I don’t really know. But come to think about it, perhaps someone she loved was. But he died.” The memory of Malte and the odd circumstances of his death came to his mind.

“I see,” Gedrel said, and glanced at Liriana and the others. “Many are the dangers my family and I face. The Enforcers of the Gods pursue us without pause.”

“Confronting the Gods is madness. They’ll kill you all without remorse. You and your families.”

“We know the risks. We’re all in this of our own free will, nobody is forcing us. We’ve been slaves for more than a thousand years, serving despotic gods, suffering every day of our lives until we die, living an existence filled with pain and sorrow, and what’s worse, empty of all hope. And men without hope in their hearts shrivel up and die, like a flower without water. One thousand years, Ikai. One thousand.”

Ikai remembered his mother’s suffering, his sister’s, his own. He understood Gedrel’s ideals, but to revolt was madness. Simply talking about it aloud was madness. *They’re fools, they’ll all be killed.* He shook his head and swore to himself.

“Have you forgotten who you are? Who we are?” Gedrel asked him in a fatherly tone. “We’re the people of the Sea, you’re a son of the sea—” he pointed to the tattoo on Ikai’s leg, then at the Ring on his left arm— “a Sea the Gods have denied us, shutting us inside the Boundary, denying us everything that’s ours by right. The Gods make us work the soil to produce

what they need. We toil day and night to survive, so as not to end up downriver in a funerary boat, or worse still, in a pit. But out there, at the end of this river, is the sea that is denied to us. Our mother. We must go back to her, for she weeps for us with open arms. If you listen to the wind on a summer night, you'll hear on its wings the crying of our mother for her lost children."

"Nobody knows what's beyond the Boundary," Ikai said.

Gedrel smiled cynically. "That's not entirely true, young friend. We can't cross the limits, the Rings won't let us, but that's not true for you. You've crossed the Boundary, haven't you, Hunter?"

Ikai shivered. How could the old man know that? The Hunters kept total silence about the missions they had to carry out. This man knew a lot more than it appeared.

"Maybe…"

"And what did you find out there? Outside this cursed circle which imprisons us?"

"Circle?" Ikai asked in surprise.

Liriana and Gedrel exchanged a look of complicity. The young Captain smiled.

"Yes, Ikai, the Boundary is the circumference of a circle. The central point is the great Sacred Monolith in the main square of the capital. The distance from the monolith to any point of the Boundary is equidistant. We've measured it."

Ikai looked at her without understanding, and Liriana noticed this. "Can you read and write?"

"I come from a farmer family," Ikai said, lowering his head. "It's forbidden to us,"

"That explains it," she said with a warm smile. "If you don't know how to read or write, you won't know basic geometry either. It's a circumference because the distance from the Monolith, the center, to any point on the Boundary is always the same. To make it clear to you: the Boundary is a cartwheel and the monolith is the axle."

Ikai understood. He felt troubled and ashamed. He had been taught to track, fight and kill. But nothing about any other subjects.

“You’ve seen things out there…?” Gedrel hinted, trying to loosen his tongue.

He nodded.

“What did you see? Other men?”

The question caught Ikai by surprise.

“Other men?” he repeated, puzzled. “No, beyond the Boundary there’s jungle and…” He swallowed, remembering his experience. “And… wild beasts. But there aren’t any men.”

“Are you sure of that, young Hunter?” Gedrel insisted, his voice still amiable.

“I am. If there were, those beasts would’ve torn them to pieces. Besides, what other men could there be? We’re the only men…”

Gedrel smiled, a deep, sincere smile. “Man always believes himself the center of the universe. It’s a flaw of our own existence. But if you think about it, there’s nothing to say that outside this one there isn’t another Boundary, with other poor wretches like us, enslaved by the Gods in the same way, believing as we do that they’re alone in the universe. The fact that we can’t leave and see what there is beyond the limits doesn’t mean there aren’t any others.”

Ikai considered Gedrel’s words. They made sense. *The Priests have always preached that only the Gods, their servants and we people exist. To go against that belief is treason.* But Gedrel was right, once again. That left him very confused. Was it possible that there were other people out there? And where were the damned Gods? Many disconcerting questions he had no answers for, and which left him baffled.

Liriana came up to him. “Whatever the case, we must go on. We must free our people from their slavery.”

“The ideal is noble, I grant you that, but you don’t have a chance. The Regent will finish you off, and if not him, it’ll be the Enforcers of the Gods. And may Mother Sea prevent the Gods from coming after you…”

Gedrel dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “The Gods? Have you ever seen one? No, nobody’s ever seen them, nobody remembers the last time a God set foot on our land, assuming they ever did. There’s not even any record of it. Do we even know what they look like? The Priests talk about them all the time, but who’s ever seen them? Nobody. Not ever.”

“We only see the Enforcers of the Gods, not their masters, and it’s always been like that,” Liriana said. “Let’s not forget that.”

“But someone creates and directs those monsters, the Enforcers”

Gedrel nodded. “True. But the Gods don’t worry me in the least right now, there are too few of us for them to notice the breath made by the flutter of our wings of hope, wherever they may be. But that same breath is turning into a wind which is bringing hope to hundreds of our people, and soon there’ll be thousands of them, and some day, not too far off, it will make our whole people rise. And they will rise as one, against the tyranny that’s crushing us.”

Ikai bowed his head. He did not want to argue with the old man. They were doomed and he knew it. They were fools with noble ideals, who would soon be caught and executed.

Gedrel leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I know what you’re thinking, and yes, that day will come. But what we’ve started can’t be stopped now. At this very moment that breath is reaching a poor peasant in his farm, and hope will spring in his heart. The same hope which will reach his family and be carried by the wind to their neighbor’s family. It can’t be stopped, Ikai. It’s started, and only victory or death will be able to stop it now.”

Ikai closed his eyes and wished with all his heart that those hapless people would think it again.

Liriana looked at him coldly. “We don’t expect you to understand. You’re not one of us. And until two days ago you were a Hunter, the enemy.”

“So what did you save me for, then?” he asked, trying to understand how he had got mixed up in that senseless madness.

“I made you a promise,” Gedrel replied with obvious sincerity, “that if one day our paths crossed again and the situation were reversed, I’d remember the favor you did me.”

“And I’m truly grateful. You saved my life when I thought I was lost…”

“… But…?”

“But… why? Why sacrifice the life of a faithful soldier for me? Why risk Liriana’s life? Why reveal her?”

“A promise is a promise,” Gedrel said. His eyes were fixed on Ikai’s.

The young man furrowed his brow. It made no sense. “There’s something else you’re not telling me, Gedrel. You wouldn’t risk your… *family* just for a debt that came out of a chance encounter.”

“Sometimes chance is nothing of the kind, my young friend, but destiny telling us which path to follow.”

He wants something of me, Ikai thought. *Otherwise he wouldn’t have saved me. But what? All I have is my life…*

“What does your destiny want of me, Gedrel?” he asked at last.

The old man laughed out loud. “You have a calculating mind, my young friend. You’re right, I do want something of you. Two things, to be precise.”

Ikai folded his arms. “The first…?”

“The first one is easy: information. As you guessed, it’s a question of time before the Regent sends Hunters after us. Time which is running out for us. For years our numbers have been small, our activities few and hidden. We’ve had some run-ins with the Enforcers of the Gods, but they think they’re so powerful and untouchable that in their servile heads the idea of revolt is inconceivable. Their small and limited minds will never manage to join the dots. Which, thank the heavens, has allowed us to go on. But the seed is germinating and the message is spreading among our brothers. In small villages groups of people like this one here gather secretly at nightfall and spread the message. Every day there are more of us, and what has begun cannot be stopped because what feeds it is one of the greatest forces in the universe: hope.”

Ikai shook his head. “Fools…”

Liriana straightened. “We are the sane ones,” she said. “The fool is the one who lives his entire life enslaved and dies without hope, without a soul, because he never even tried to be free for a single day of his miserable life.”

The words were so forceful that as he met those turquoise eyes which were now glaring at him, he was dismayed.

“Well said, my dear child,” Gedrel said with a broad smile. “You see, Ikai, our numbers are beginning to be visible, and rumors have reached the Palace. We’ve managed to keep them quiet, but they’ll soon reach the Regent. Hiding our activities from the incompetent Guards or the vain

Enforcers of the Gods is one thing, but hiding from the Hunters is a different matter."

"Haven't you managed to infiltrate the Hunters?" Ikai asked. He looked aside at Liriana, who after all had infiltrated the Regent's Guard.

"Unfortunately it hasn't been possible. We tried, but without success. The Hunters, as you know very well, are personally recruited by the Master Hunters. It's a closed society, and has been for hundreds of years. Nobody knows their secrets except the Master Hunters themselves."

"And they're loyal to the Regent," said Ikai.

"More than loyal to the tyrant, I'd say they are well aware of the danger they and their families risk if they oppose the Gods, and they deliberately prefer not to."

Ikai remembered Sejof's words. "You're not wrong there," he said.

"That's why I've been looking for a long time for a Hunter who could help us…"

"And then along I came…"

"You, who have nothing to lose as you're already sentenced to die. You can reveal the secrets which are kept so jealously. That's why when they were going to finish you off, Liriana intervened."

Ikai looked at the Captain, who gave him a wink, softening it with a smile.

"How long had you been watching me?"

"Since you arrived in the city."

Ikai sighed. "I can see you have plans and determination, quite apart from your grandiose ideas."

Gedrel laughed gently.

"What do you want to know? You've saved my life, and I owe you."

Gedrel acknowledged this with a gesture. "How can we hide from the Hunters? It's said that when they search for someone they always find them, no matter where they hide, even if it's underground. They're said to be born man-hunters, that they never miss a trail and that no prey of theirs ever escapes. They say that if they catch you, they kill you. Is that true?"

"It's true."

"Is there no possibility of escaping them?" Liriana asked. "In the Guard we've heard those same rumors, and it's true that whenever they set

off on a hunt they bring their prey back. I've seen it many times. But they surely can't be infallible. You can't be" —she came up to Ikai and nudged him in the chest— "infallible."

Their eyes met. Ikai could read the doubt in hers. He answered the accusation gently. "You have wide knowledge of many things, but you're ignorant of the secrets of the Hunters."

Liriana drew her head back and looked at him curiously.

"The candidates are selected personally by the Master Hunters for their innate qualities, and they're rigorously trained to be exceptional man-hunters. The secret art of man-hunting is something which has been perfected over more than eight hundred years, turning men like me into exceptional trackers and fighters. I've been trained daily, for years, following a strict schedule of skills, until I became what I am. But Liriana is right, that makes me an exceptional bird of prey, but not someone infallible. What makes Hunters infallible is…" — they all looked at Ikai, and silence fell over the room — "is the Falcon Eye."

Gedrel and Liriana stared hard at him.

"Falcon Eye? What's that?" Gedrel asked.

"It's an artifact of the Gods."

Liriana frowned. "The artifacts of the Gods can only be used by their Enforcers, not by men."

"That's not entirely true. The artifacts are usually in the hands of the Eyes-of-the-Gods, but there's at least one which is used by men. I can assure you of it, because I've seen my master use it many times."

Liriana looked at Gedrel as though seeking support. Gedrel was looking thoughtful. "What you're telling us is deeply important. Until now we'd always thought the artifacts were out of men's reach. If they can be used, it gives us a new possibility…"

"We might use the artifacts against them!" Liriana said enthusiastically.

Ikai was not happy about this. Confronting the Gods with their own weapons was at the very least an insane idea. The desperation of the group was beginning to be apparent.

"Tell us about the Falcon Eye," Gedrel said.

"All right. Every Master Hunter has one. He guards it with his life. It's an Artifact of Power in the form of a disc. It's small, crystalline, with a

golden pip in its center. It sends out a golden beam of light to indicate the direction of the prey we have to chase. That's why the Hunters never fail."

"Can any man use it?" Liriana asked. "Could I use it?"

"That I don't know. I've only seen Master Sejof, and for that he protects his hand with a special gauntlet, which is also of the Gods. I don't really know much about the Artifact. They say it's the Eyes-of-the-Gods who give them to the Masters. When a new Master Hunter is invested, he meets with the Eyes behind closed doors at a certain place for three days and nights, and returns with the Artifact. The Masters keep everything about the object absolutely secret. That's all I know, I'm afraid."

Gedrel nodded and sighed. "Does it have any other power you might have witnessed?"

"Yes, one more," Ikai said. He glanced down at the Golden Ring on his left arm. "It allows the master to communicate with the Hunters over long distances."

"How?" Liriana asked, her turquoise eyes shining with excitement.

"I don't know how, but he projects thoughts and images to our minds, and he does it through the Rings."

"Very interesting…" Gedrel mused.

"It's all I know."

Liriana frowned. "We must find how to hide from the Falcon Eye, or else they'll hunt us down like sewer rats."

"Easy, my child, all is not lost. We'll find some way of fooling it," Gedrel said soothingly. "Today we know more than we did yesterday. Young Ikai is being a great help."

"I told you I'd help, and I always keep my word. You said you wanted two things of me, Gedrel. What's the second?"

Gedrel's face shadowed. "I want you to help Liriana cross the Boundary."

Ikai was left at a loss for words.

"Fate has chosen that your paths will cross and be one from this point on."

"Our paths?" Ikai muttered. "I don't understand…"

"You can cross the Boundary, and knowing what a Hunter knows, you'll find a way for Liriana to cross alive."

“That’s not possible. As far as I know, only the Enforcers of the Gods and the Hunters can cross the Boundary. Nobody else.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the way, because your destiny awaits you and Liriana has the key that will lead you to it.”

Ikai looked at Liriana, trying to make sense of what he was hearing.

“She will lead you to your sister,” Gedrel assured him.

Ikai tensed and turned to the old man. “Do you know where she is? Do you know?”

“Yes, I do. Accept the deal and I’ll tell you.”

Ikai weighed up his options. He did not know where the Enforcers of the Gods had taken Kyra. The Guard was after him, and soon they would send the Hunters to find him. He had no options. He could do nothing but accept the deal, he could not risk going out into the open in search of answers.

He gazed at Gedrel for a moment, wondering whether to trust the man or not. Finally he made up his mind.

“I accept. You have my word.”

Gedrel heaved a sigh and clasped his hands together.

“Your sister has been taken to the Eternal City.”

Ikai received the devastating news and felt his soul sink. His worst fear had come true. Kyra was in the city of the Gods. He could hardly believe it. If the idea of freeing her had been all-but-impossible before, now it was plain suicide. He felt as if a mountain had fallen on him and crushed him.

“We’ll leave at dawn,” Liriana said, and left the room without waiting for a reply.

Ikai watched her leave, full of determination. Suicide or not, Kyra was alive and that was what really mattered. He would rescue her. If he had to go to the dwelling of the Gods themselves in order to do so, then he would go.

Only death would stop him.

16

Startled, Kyra woke up. She opened her eyes wide and pierced the strange glassy material in front of her with a look of wonder. She saw Yosane opposite her, staring at her from inside a vertical pod, her face contorted by terror. Kyra pushed the glass hard, but it did not move in the least. She was trapped. She half-closed her eyes and studied the sinister cell she was imprisoned in: it looked to her like a sarcophagus with a glass cover.

“What the hell’s going on?” she asked her friend, but the sound did not penetrate the pod. She tried to remember what had happened, but it was impossible. She was on her feet, locked up and without any recent memory. She looked down at her body and saw her naked skin covered in red. For a moment she thought it was blood and she was afraid. *What have they done to me?* She felt her arm and found that it was not blood. Something was wrong with her skin; she only hoped it would not be permanent.

Her feet felt cold. She saw they were submerged in some viscous substance, like oil, which reached to her ankles. The soles of her feet hurt terribly and she felt weak. The pod was filled with a whitish substance, like mist, which floated around her body. When she breathed she could see it coming in through her nostrils. *What on earth are they doing to me?* she thought uneasily. Luckily the substance did not seem harmful, but she felt invaded, outraged. She stopped breathing, but realized at once it was a stupid thing to do. She had no choice, she would have to breathe.

“Bastards! What are you doing to us?” she shouted, but once again the sound did not penetrate the pod. Pure wrath came over her, and she beat at the glass as hard as she could with both fists. She shouted and went on battering at it until the pain made her stop. Full of frustration, she knew she would not be able to break it. She looked behind her and saw that the back part of the pod was metal. She hit it with fists, elbows… but that too was useless. All she managed to do was hurt herself more. Finally she stopped, furious at her own fruitless attempts. She was exhausted. It seemed to be

unbreakable, at least without a weapon. She would have given anything for a steel bar to hit the walls of the pod with.

I wonder why they've put us in here? What have they got in mind?

She leaned her face against the glass and tried to find out where they were. She looked for Idana and found her beside Yosane, two pods down to the right. Her eyes also showed fear, but when she saw Kyra's eyes on her, she smiled wanly. Between her two friends she saw Lian and Urda. Lian's face was as pale as if she had seen a ghost. The usual arrogance she sheltered behind was gone completely. Urda was glaring left and right, her thick brow furrowed; she looked genuinely worried.

Kyra counted six pods in all in front of her own, forming a semicircle, with two more on her right and left. She guessed there would be six on her side too, also forming a semicircle, although she could not see them properly: one for each of the prisoners. She estimated that there were about ten paces between her and her two friends. The chamber must be circular. Walls and floor were marble-white and shone spotlessly.

A sense of something ominous began to grow in her stomach, and no matter how hard she tried she could not get rid of it. Suddenly two Eyes-of-the-Gods walked into the chamber, one from each end, and came to stand in front of them in the middle of the room. Kyra tensed. Something was about to happen. The Eyes threw themselves on the floor and remained prone, in total submission. Kyra knew what this meant: The Golden God.

And as if on cue, the hated deity came into the chamber, moving as if hovering, without touching the ground. He stopped right in the middle, between the two semicircles of prisoners.

"Adamis…" She remembered his name, as if it came out of a deep nightmare.

Kyra could not take off her eyes of that graceful being with gold-colored skin, in shining scaled armor and with a long transparent cloak hanging from his slender shoulders. At a gesture of the God the Eyes got to their feet, brought out their silver books and went over every one of the pods, taking notes. When they had finished they stood to one side in silence with their heads bowed, like respectful statues. *What the hell are they doing?* Kyra thought, feeling more and more nervous. Her stomach lurched when she imagined the atrocities this being might have in store for them.

Suddenly somebody else came into the chamber.

Another God!

He walked with determination. His golden skin and slenderness were unmistakable. He was dressed like Adamis: a long white tunic with silver trimming and over it, solid armor of silver which covered him from neck to thighs. His limbs too were protected with greaves and gauntlets, also of silver. From his shoulders, protected by plates, hung an almost transparent cloak. At his waist were two short swords with simple pommels, no precious stones. After a ceremonious greeting, he came to stand behind Adamis, who seemed to have been waiting for him.

Kyra swallowed. The new God was very tall, a whole foot taller than Adamis. He was also much broader in the shoulders and more muscular. From his physique, Kyra guessed this must be some powerful warrior. His head was clean-shaven except for a long braid which fell from the nape of his neck down his back. He was much more athletic than Adamis, and the features of his face were not as beautiful and delicate; there was a hint of… brutality in them. Seeing them together Kyra guessed this must be a lord and a warrior, perhaps his bodyguard. Watching those two Gods before her gave her such an icy chill that she shivered.

And then something terrible as well as unbelievable happened. Wide-eyed with awe, she saw not one, not two, but eight Golden Gods walk into the room. They came forward: slender, their skin the color of old gold, powerful, divine, lords and masters of everything before their eyes. They walked with the assurance and arrogance which belonged to those who were owners of the world. If the vision of the first God had shocked Kyra, seeing that group together, with that aura of power which surrounded them, terrified her. For a long moment she could not breathe. When she recovered, her heart sank. She had always doubted that the Gods existed, and if they really did, she had never imagined there could be more than a few of them. She did not know how many, but unconsciously she had thought there could be no more than a handful. Yet here alone, gathered before her, were ten. And then the horrible truth hit her with the force of a wild bull charging. That enormous and magnificent city in the middle of the sea, with its five great rings: how many Gods dwelt in it? How many, by the heavens?

When they had arrived Kyra had just seen Enforcers of the Gods and slaves; perhaps that had encouraged her idea that the Gods could be counted on the fingers of one hand. But now she came to think about it, it was not

logical. If there were so few of them, why should they need such a huge city? What was more, why did they make humans produce things so ceaselessly while at the same time they starved them? How many Gods could there be in that accursed city? A hundred, a thousand? Even more? Kyra had no idea, but the mere possibility of a thousand filled her with horror.

The Gods walked into the chamber in twos, forming pairs in a strange parade. Kyra noticed at once that in each case a lord was accompanied by his bodyguard. They seemed to be coming to present their respects to Adamis, who waited in the center of the chamber. The first two were dressed in intense red, decorated with brilliant orange. Their armor was also red, but a darker tone, as if dyed in blood. The cloaks which fell from their shoulders gave the impression of having caught fire and were spreading it through the air as they passed.

They came up to Adamis, greeted him with sober bows and stood to one side. Watching the scene, considering what had taken place before, Kyra guessed Adamis was the host and the group his guests. The second pair of Gods wore soft blues, with different hues intermingled. Their armor on the other hand was an intense indigo. As they moved, their cloaks seemed to sway like the waves of a calm sea. These were followed by two Gods dressed in brown and ochre. The cuirasses on their chests seemed to be of pure rock and their cloaks, an earthy brown, to have been made out of the side of a mountain. Finally the last pair, in shades of warm white, reached the center of the chamber and greeted their host. Their cloaks appeared so light and delicate that when a breath of air lifted them they did not fall back to touch the floor.

Kyra was spellbound, not missing a detail. So strange was the scene that she nearly forgot her fears. What was this weird reunion? Who were these Gods?

The God-Host waved his hand. The four God Lords saluted him, then began to inspect the pods containing the prisoners, while their bodyguards waited with stoical expressions. Adamis did not move. The God in bright red approached Kyra at once and stared inquisitively at her through the glass. His face, though its features were delicate, did not have Adamis' beauty: on the contrary, it was a cruel face. It was the eyes… bloodthirsty… red… and those curved lips which were smiling at her ruthlessly. Kyra,

conscious of her nakedness and the fact that she was being examined like a sacrificial animal, felt so humiliated that she would willingly have put a dagger through the bloodshot eyes of this abominable creature.

Red, that is interesting… the God projected against Kyra's mind. He gave her a crooked smile. Kyra felt the mental blow as if she had been slapped.

"Swine!" she cried furiously.

The face of the God darkened. His eyes shone with pure hatred. *How dare you, you insolent slave! You'll soon learn your place!* There was such a load of malice in the words that Kyra's mind blackened and a terrible migraine assailed her. She threw her head back, overborne. The God smiled a satisfied and malevolent smile. Kyra spat in his face, although the crystal prevented it from reaching him.

The God's eyes opened wide with rage. *You shall pay for this insolence. I shall tear off your skin in strips!* The mental message was so strong that Kyra's head hit the back of the pod.

The God in blue came forward. Kyra put her hands on her head; the pain was so excruciating she thought she would burst. The two Gods exchanged glances. Although their lips did not move and there was no sound whatsoever, she knew they were talking. The sinister God who had threatened her turned to examine her companions. Kyra immediately feared for Yosane. Unfortunately she could do nothing for her while she was trapped there, and felt as weak and powerless as an imprisoned animal.

For some time the four Gods examined the girls minutely, one by one. They took their time, observing not only their naked bodies, which were now painted in different colors, but the strange symbols on the pods above their heads. For some reason the four showed a greater interest in Kyra, which could only be bad for her, very bad. Anxiety was beginning to take its toll on her, and she was finding it difficult to breathe. After watching their behavior, walking calmly among them, inspecting them as if they were cattle in a market, Kyra was certain that this reunion of Gods, this event, was some sort of auction or sale. Adamis had invited these four Gods to show them the merchandise his Enforcers had brought him, and now he was going to sell them, like animals.

Yes, it makes sense… it also explains why I haven't been raped yet: I'm more valuable to those degenerate golden-skinned monsters if I'm

unspoiled. They've prepared us and now they're putting us on show for the sale. Yes, that's what's happening. She closed her eyes and sighed heavily. Even though that might be the brutal fate awaiting her, she would never stop fighting, she would never give up, in spite of everything. Kyra looked with loathing at the God-Host, who returned an unfathomable look with his blue-gray eyes.

Behave, you are gambling with your destiny, Adamis warned her. The mental blow was clear and painless.

The warning caught her unawares; she was not expecting it from the haughty God. What did he care if she, a slave, survived or not? Survive… the word made her think of her brother Ikai. Yes, she had to survive and escape, and so she would. But she could not trust this God. Why should she, in that situation? She was his prisoner, his slave, she was at his mercy. No, she would never trust him, never. She half-closed her eyes and gave Adamis a glance of complete distrust. The mental message reached her at once.

You do not trust me. It is natural. But believe me when I tell you that your fate is about to be decided. I do not have time for explanations. Hold your tongue and your temper before the Lords, or you will suffer.

Kyra shook her head slowly at him. And in reply something reached her which totally confounded her. In her mind she began to hear voices, distant at first, stronger after the first moment, growing louder. The voices clogged her mind, so that for an instant she believed she would lose her sanity. Closing her eyes hard she concentrated and managed to modulate and contain the voices. They began to make sense. She was listening to the conversation of the Gods. She could hear the mental voices of the four Lords, each different and unique. She shivered.

Adamis was staring at her. He must be relaying the conversation to her. Why? What did he want? Kyra thought for a moment, then she understood: he wanted her to trust him. He was allowing her to listen in on that private conversation, hoping to gain something of her trust in exchange. Kyra concentrated to avoid being overwhelmed as she had been before and listened inside her head, giving all her attention to it. In fact Adamis had surprised her with that move, and the best Kyra could do was to put all her senses into listening and try to find out what was going on. That way she might have a chance…

Respected Lords, Adamis said, bowing solemnly before the other four God-Lords, *as is required by our law I here present to you the Selected Girls from the East. Before beginning the Ritual of Selection the representatives of the Five Royal Houses must inspect them and give their approval. This is required by the protocol to guarantee the equity and transparency of the ritual.*

The four Lords returned the greeting, one by one, with brief but respectful bows. The Lord dressed in blue silk waved a hand at the pods. *Twelve young girls. A scanty harvest, I must say.*

Adamis nodded. *The harvest can never be estimated beforehand. Twelve young girls is all that were available in the East. The fruits of the earth are not always those hoped-for, and the harvest is unpredictable. It is not possible to know how many will be born and will survive to reach the minimum qualities required.*

In any case, said the Lord-God in brown, *quantity is not the factor which most interests my house, the greatest purity of the fruits is what we seek.*

Each noble house has its own priorities, Adamis said with a slight twist of his head, *and it is nobody's business to question them.*

There is only one which my house desires, said the sinister Lord in the red. *The rest do not reach the quality required by my house.*

This harvest has provided us with one young girl of red quality, four of orange quality and seven yellow, Adamis explained.

Kyra looked down at her body, hoping the red had turned into another color, but no, it was red, and very intense. She swore to herself. *Why me? Of all of them! Just my bloody luck!* She lowered her eyelids and studied Yosane, whose body was painted a vivid orange. Next she eyed Idana, who was also orange. *What the hell do these colors and qualities mean? What are they talking about? Why are we so different? We're all about the same age and we come from the same land. What do they want with us, those inhuman pigs? To hell with them!* Furious, she looked at the other slaves and noticed that Lian and Urda, like Yosane and Idana, were covered in orange. The rest shone with a sickly yellow.

On the House of Eret, of the First Ring, which I represent, Adamis was saying, his arms spread wide, *falls the responsibility in rotation of the Selection this cycle. To each cycle a house: thus our law lays down, and*

thus must it be. The honor of the gathering and preparation of the Selected, I accept in the name of my House this time. In addition, the House of Eret must guarantee the integrity of the ritual and the absolute purity of the ceremony. Adamis glanced at the two Eyes-of-the-Gods, who began to take notes. *I hereby give testimony of the presentation of twelve young women of the East, all selected for the ritual.* With a motion of his hand he indicated the prisoners. The Golden watched them with intense almond eyes in different shades, and Kyra's blood froze.

Have the Lords of the Five Houses had sufficient time for the pre-ritual inspection of the Selected? Adamis went on in his function as master of ceremonies.

The four Lords nodded, coldly ceremonial.

Adamis nodded in return. *Let us begin.*

The four Lords came to stand beside Adamis, forming a circle in the exact center of the room. They were standing on five perfect silver circles. The five together made up a central, wider one in gold, like five moons around one sun. The symmetry and perfection of the forms caught Kyra's attention. Surely Yosane would have a theory about that unusual pattern.

Who presents himself in the name of the House of Aru, of the Fifth Ring, to speak in its name and defend its interests? Adamis asked.

I, Lord Saxti, heir to the crown of the House of Aru. The God murmured something unintelligible and showed the palms of his hands. A golden beam ran along his body and the circle under his feet lit up, emitting a strong silver light which shot up to the dome. For an instant the God was bathed in its radiance, then the light blinked and turned gold.

Adamis nodded. *Your royal lineage has been verified.*

Lord Saxti withdrew his hands and the light stopped.

Do we have your approval, Lord Saxti? Adamis asked.

You do, replied the God-Prince in blue, and made a gesture of acceptance.

The Eyes-of-the-Gods took notes and the Prince fell silent.

Who presents himself in the name of the House of Idnem, of the Fourth Ring, to speak in its name and defend its interests? Adamis repeated.

I, Lord Arrul, brother of the King of the House of Idnem.

As with his predecessor, he passed the test of lineage.

Do we have your approval, Lord Arrul?

You do, answered the God-Lord in brown and ochre.

Adamis nodded. He repeated his question and the test of lineage for the House of Aurez, of the Third Ring. Lord Ezia, second son of the king, came forward.

Do we have the approval of Lord Ezia?

You do, replied the God-Lord in white silk.

Lastly Adamis turned to the God-Lord in red silk and bloody armor.

Kyra could not see the bloodthirsty eyes of the God, but even so her mind recalled them and she shivered.

Do we have the approval of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring, Lord Asu?

For an instant the Lord remained silent. Tension began to build between Adamis and Asu, a latent tension. The prolonged silence before the reply heightened that tension until it was almost palpable.

You do, Lord Asu said at last with haughty condescension.

Adamis eyed Asu for an instant, something which caught Kyra's attention. She could swear she witnessed a flash of rage, but in those impassive golden faces it was impossible to make out any emotion. Adamis stared ahead and went on with the ceremony. Lord Asu's lineage was proved.

Lastly, representing the House of Eret, of the First Ring, he said, raising his head, *I hereby present myself, Adamis, son of King Teore and master of ceremonies, for this ritual.*

The four Lords acknowledged Adamis with a deep bow.

The Five Royal Houses are here represented today, the ritual is legitimated. Adamis looked at the two Eyes, who nodded. He spread his arms wide. *The young women have been prepared for the ritual and inspected by my Lords. I hereby initiate the Ritual of Selection*.

The Lords bowed their heads and looked at the golden circle on the floor. Adamis waved his arm and murmured a few words. Before Kyra's astonished eyes the earth opened. A golden sphere of a big size came out of it, rising gently upwards, until it hovered above the heads of the five Gods. At an order from Adamis the sphere began to rotate on itself, producing a

buzzing so high-pitched it nearly perforated her eardrums. Kyra put her hands over her ears to protect them.

Suddenly a silver beam issued from the sphere and began to sweep across the pods one by one. When it reached hers, Kyra stepped back, fearing some harmful effect, but the long beam of light passed through her chest, then her head and went on to the next prisoner without causing her more than a shiver. She followed the movement of the beam with her eyes and watched it examine Yosane and Idana, who reacted as she had herself. When it had finished with the last of the twelve, the light vanished and the sphere stopped spinning, but the horrible buzz continued to trouble her ears.

Adamis placed his hands on the sphere. *The moment of the Selection has come, my Lords, he said.* The five Gods placed their hands on the sphere. Kyra wondered what they could be doing, and an uneasy feeling came over her. Acid from her stomach rose to her mouth and she had to force it back down.

The sphere bathed the five with its silver light, then finally stopped buzzing. The sphere spun on itself, and the five withdrew their hands. The beam of light focused on Lord Saxti. The God turned around and the light went from him to… Idana! Lord Saxti nodded. The beam focused on another of the twelve prisoners, and the Lord nodded again respectfully. The beam of light vanished.

Kyra understood that the sphere had assigned Idana and the other girl to that God, and what was worse, she herself had not been chosen. Would they be separated? Yes, for sure they would. What would become of Idana? Her eyes turned to her. She seemed resigned; she accepted it. Would she survive? Idana was all kindness and giving, but that would not be much help there, rather the opposite. With a sea of lava in her stomach, Kyra tried to stay calm and avoid jumping to rash conclusions.

The sphere repeated the process with Lord Arrul and Lord Ezia. Three of the girls were assigned to the first, among them Urda. Kyra saw resilience in her eyes. She was not afraid, she would accept her destiny and do her best to survive. Lian was assigned to Lord Ezia, together with three others. Lian had not recovered her natural color; she seemed overwhelmed by what had happened. She was so pale and her eyes were so sunken that she looked as if she would faint at any moment.

Lord Asu was then chosen by the sphere. Kyra breathed deeply. *No, no, no, not me, by the Mother Sea, not me!* she wished with all her heart. Lord Asu turned and looked at her. Kyra felt as if an arrow were piercing her chest. She clenched her fists hard and tried to calm her nerves. She would not let him see her tremble. Lord Asu smiled with that twisted satyr's grin. Kyra knew at that instant with absolute certainty that the God wished to possess her, in body and spirit.

The beam turned from Lord Asu towards Kyra. Time seemed to stop while the silver light came closer to her. She stopped breathing. Her heart was galloping wildly. The light passed in front of her pod and selected another of the girls beside her. Kyra gasped in relief and felt immensely sorry for the other girl. Then the light moved again, and Kyra feared it would come back to her. But to her astonishment, it selected Yosane! Kyra felt as if she had been stabbed. Her friend was trembling like a fawn in the intense light of the beam. Her eyes were wide with terror.

Not Yosane! She won't survive! Yosane!

The light vanished.

No! Lord Asu exclaimed with fire in his eyes.

The ritual is sacred, it must not be altered, Adamis reminded him neutrally.

Lord Asu gave Adamis a piercing look. He pointed at Kyra.

I want her! he said. There was clear rage in his voice.

That prerogative is not yours, my Lord. Nor is it of any of the Five Houses. The ceremony must not be altered.

She is mine! he cried furiously.

The balance of powers between the Houses is at stake, Adamis warned him. *The penalty for such an effrontery is death, Lord Asu.*

Lord Asu glared at the other three Lords, who were watching him carefully. The bodyguards reached for their weapons. Tension began to fill the hall. Nobody moved; the looks in their eyes cut like the sharpest steel.

Finish the ceremony! Lord Asu conceded at last.

The sphere illuminated Adamis in silver, and he turned slowly. The beam of light shot from the God straight to Kyra. The silver light reached her, but instead of feeling anxiety or fear, she felt tremendous relief. She breathed out hard. She had been on the brink of falling into the hands of

Lord Asu, and in comparison Adamis seemed a much better option, a thousand times better. The beam of light vanished for good, since Kyra was the last to be Selected. The sphere spun on itself again, descended slowly between the five Lords and disappeared the same way it had come.

Adamis spread his arms wide. *The Ritual of Selection has been performed impartially, equitably and in accordance with the law of the Five High Kings. The Lords must accept the selection, as the Sphere of Power has made the choice for each Royal House.* Without waiting for a reply he folded his arms and saluted the Lords. *Let each House acquire what is its own by right and ritual.*

Lord Saxti went to Idana. *Good quality, this female. Not excellent, but good. My House is pleased. The other one I was assigned is of low quality, but they will be well employed. We must not underestimate the fruits of the earth.* He turned to Adamis. *Let them be made ready.*

Lord Adamis, when will you have them ready for us to take to our houses? Lord Arrul asked.

They are being purified as we speak. The process will be complete this evening. If you wish, you may enjoy the amenities of my house while you wait.

Thank you, Lord Adamis, but that will not be necessary. I shall send someone from my house for them. The obligations of my position are many, and although I would gladly enjoy your hospitality, unfortunately I must return to my ring to take care of them. But I very much appreciate your invitation.

Adamis nodded and bowed.

If the offer is extended to all Lords, Lord Ezia said, *I would gladly accept your generous hospitality until the slaves are ready, Lord Adamis.*

Of course, Lord Ezia. You honor me.

Lord Asu stepped forward to stand in front of Adamis.

As host and master of ceremonies for this cycle, I am sure you will see no impediment in an exchange with one of your distinguished guests, he said, spreading his arms wide as his macabre smile came alive.

All eyes turned to the Lord in red at once.

No! Kyra thought. *What's he planning, this twisted pig?*

Adamis looked Lord Asu in the eye, but said nothing.

My two selected for yours, he said in a wheedling tone. *It is a fair trade, two for one. An orange female and a yellow one for your red one. Will you honor me by granting me this small favor? My House would be indebted to yours…*

The three Lords tensed, as if this proposal were in some way dangerous. But Adamis remained calm. *It would be a pleasure for me to be able to grant you this wish, Lord Asu, still more so knowing that the powerful house of the Second Ring would be indebted to mine. But I must refuse your proposition, since it would go against the equity of the ritual. This ceremony is sacred for the Five Houses as it guarantees the continuation of the delicate balance of forces between them. Should the Selection be impaired by an exchange, the balance would be broken and would lead to severe repercussions.*

It is no more than an exchange, two slaves for one, Lord Asu said in a rasping voice, trying to brush aside the importance of the matter.

You know very well it is more than that. And even if I accepted your proposal, the other Houses would refuse flatly. He glanced at the three other Lords, who nodded at once in confirmation. *The law establishes that the result of the Selection is sacred and cannot be altered in any way.*

I want her! Lord Asu burst out. *She dared to insult me. You must give her to me. No slave may show disrespect to us and not receive her due. The effrontery must be paid with blood. Give her to me, it is my right to apply the punishment. The Lords will not be opposed to her receiving what she deserves. Lord Saxti witnessed the insult.*

Adamis turned to Lord Saxti, who nodded in confirmation.

Kyra’s stomach tied itself in a knot.

You wish to punish a slave? Really? Or is it to obtain for yourself the best selection of the ritual?

How dare you! yelled Lord Asu.

Lord Asu’s bodyguard unsheathed his sword. Almost at once Adamis’ bodyguard followed his example and brought out his short swords. An instant later the other three bodyguards did the same. With blinding speed, in the blink of an eye, they moved to stand beside their masters, protecting them with their big bodies.

A protective sphere of pure fire surrounded Lord Asu and his bodyguard. The other Gods also raised their own protective spheres.

Adamis did not flinch. *If you shed blood in this sacred chamber, in this, my home, nothing will save you, not even your Lord Father the King. You will be beheaded. That is the law. I recommend that you calm down and think again.*

Lord Asu's eyes shone with the intensity of an erupting volcano. Kyra thought he would kill Adamis there and then. But she was wrong. The God withdrew the barrier of flames and half-closed his eyes in hatred.

You will pay for this, Adamis. I swear, on my house and my honor! he said venomously. *Nobody insults me and goes unpunished! Lord or slave! Keep her, but be sure you will pay, very dearly!*

Adamis nodded and said nothing more. Slowly he pointed to the door. *The Selected will be made ready and delivered to my Lords as soon as possible.*

Lord Asu threw one last glance at Kyra, filled with visceral hatred. She received a brutal mental blow. *You will remember me, you filthy slave!* Kyra's head hit the metal behind her and a terrible pain ran through her. Lord Asu left without saluting his host, with his bodyguard close behind.

The remaining Lords lowered their protections and after paying their friendly respects to Adamis they left the chamber, followed by their protectors. When the last of them had left, Adamis exchanged a look of relief with his bodyguard.

The next time I will not be able to save you, he said to Kyra. *If you wish to survive, slave, you must learn your place.*

Kyra wanted to reply, but realized she had lost communication with Adamis, or rather that the God-Lord had cut it off. The two Gods, Lord and Bodyguard, left the chamber.

The room was left in half-darkness. Kyra looked down at her red body, then at Yosane and Idana's orange ones. She sighed with deep anxiety. They were being separated. They were being taking to different Houses. What for? What did they want to do with them? The more she thought about it — the separation, the Gods, their naked bodies covered in strange colors— the more anxious she felt. She tried to summon up her courage, and for the first time since she could remember she found it impossible.

Fear took hold of her.

17

They were rowing in synchrony, and the small boat was moving at a steady pace on the quiet water. Liriana half-turned, and Ikai was met by those turquoise eyes which seemed to melt into the immensity of the river, as if they belonged to it. He found it hard to stop staring at them.

“We can’t be far,” he said, sounding worried.

What with the days of journeying downriver and the fast pace they had kept up, he had estimated that they must be very close. And he was not wrong. Behind some trees to the east, they could see a rocky formation. Over thousands of years the winds, with their eternal caress, had carved what was now the shape of a giant horse which appeared to be drinking from the river. Ikai found himself marveling at this natural sculpture. *And in three thousand years, when men and Gods have disappeared from the face of the earth, you’ll still be here, won’t you?* he thought uneasily.

Liriana turned around.

“We’re there,” Ikai said, pointing to the great rocky formation.

The young woman nodded, and they headed towards the western shore. He knew that route well, since many poor souls tried to escape downriver in the hope that the Boundary had no effect on the waters of the vast river. Unfortunately they were wrong. Most died by drowning when they hit the barrier of the Gods and fell off their boats. A few reached the shore and were captured by the Hunters, or decapitated *in situ* by the Executors. The corpses were left floating against the barrier, forming a macabre dam.

Ikai shrugged involuntarily. It was a dreadful image, and one that was engraved with fire on his memory. He had witnessed it too many times. What had always caught his attention was that the boats which the fugitives used for the flight went on downriver, intact. The Boundary only affected men, although animals did not come near it as they could instinctively feel the dangerous barrier and hence ran away from it. The twisted mind of the Gods which had thought of that sinister prison for the Senoca was beyond Ikai’s understanding.

They grounded the boat in a hidden nook, then picked up the two satchels with their supplies, slung their short bows over their shoulders and went into the forest like the outlaws they were now. Night was falling.

“Follow me in silence,” Ikai told her. “Step where I step. We’re risking our lives now, so be very careful.”

Liriana nodded. They went on for a couple of hours more, following the shore until they saw a solid round building by the river. The walls were made of rock painted gold, and the roofs were of silver-varnished wood. In front of the building a long, wide wooden pier ran into the great river. Several boats were moored there, swaying with the current. The two fugitives hid behind a fallen birch tree and watched in silence.

“That’s not one of the outposts of the Guard,” Liriana whispered.

“No, but it is one that belongs to the Enforcers of the Gods. They use it to check the passage of authorized vessels. There’s always an Eye and a dozen Executors posted here.”

“What’s the plan?” Liriana asked in another whisper. “How are we going to avoid them and cross?”

“There’s not much choice. We have to cross the Boundary, and although I can do it at any point, you can’t.” He indicated the Captain’s Ring with the Lion engraving.

She fixed her turquoise eyes on him. “You made a deal with Gedrel. You help me cross the Boundary and I’ll help you get to the Eternal City.”

“I don’t understand what you’re looking for there. Why do you want to go to the city of the Gods? There’s nothing for you there except slavery, death, or something even worse…”

“I have my reasons, just as you do. You’re not the only one who’s had loved ones taken from him. In any case, it’s not your business. You go through with your part of the deal, Hunter.”

Ikai did not like her tone. His concern for the young woman was genuine, not simply a trick to get rid of her.

“Are you sure you know where the Eternal City is?”

“You get me across and I’ll take you to it. Don’t worry, I’ll do my part.”

Ikai shook his head. He did not like the deal one bit, there was no guarantee. On the other hand, he had no choice. He had to reach Kyra

before something irreparable happened to her, and Liriana was the only viable option at that moment. Nobody he had ever met knew the location of the divine city. It was a secret the Enforcers of the Gods kept very well. In fact nobody who had ever been there had come back to tell the tale. And when he thought about it he realized how critical Kyra's situation was, and that he would never see her again if he did not get to her and rescue her. He felt an icy chill running down his back. He shivered and noticed the gooseflesh on his arms.

He pointed at the two Executors on watch duty under the light of a couple of torches. "Are you sure you want to go on? It's desperately risky. I have no choice, I just have to rescue my sister. You can still turn around and save your life."

Liriana glared at him, her eyes as piercing as darts. "You have your reasons and I have mine. The decision is made."

"We have very few chances of getting across… the plan is crazy…"

"Is there any other point we could cross which would be less watched?"

Ikai shook his head. "Not that I know of. In all the time I've been with the Hunters I've only seen three spots where you can cross the Boundary, and the other two are much better guarded because they're on land."

"Then let's go on," Liriana said with conviction.

He sighed. "All right, then. Not a sound. Make sure your bow's well strapped to your back, put your quiver in the satchel and tie it well. We're going to get wet."

Liriana understood. She nodded and made sure her gear was tightly strapped to her back. Very slowly Ikai dragged himself to the edge and went into the water. The river welcomed them with a wet and freezing embrace. He shook his body vigorously under the water to fight against the cold. He loved water, even though at that temperature it was torture. He was an excellent swimmer and had trained intensively with the Hunters. He glanced at his companion behind him. She should be just as good, as it was also part of training for the Guard.

They swam in silence, hidden by the night. He looked up at the sky. It was going to rain; the sky was densely cloudy. That played in their favor. They moved toward the pier without being seen. When he reached the outer end of the pier his Ring emitted a stinging buzz and his arm started to

tremble. They were very near the Boundary. He plunged his arm in the water and the buzzing stopped. Liriana reached him, and her own Ring began to buzz alarmingly. Ikai seized her arm and pulled it under the water. They heard steps above their heads, on the pier.

They discovered us! he thought in alarm.

He hid as well as he could under the boards, with Liriana at his side, and they waited. His arm was now trembling uncontrollably; they were very close to the barrier. The steps became more numerous. At least half a dozen people were right above their heads. *They're searching for us!*

Liriana looked at him, her eyes wide with fear. He put his finger to his lips. A flash hit the surface of the river. Ikai narrowed his eyes and searched with the water up to his nose. A transport ship was coming down the middle of the river. It was big, a cargo ship, and judging by how deeply-sunk the hull was, it carried something heavy. As it came close to the pier, he made out two rectangular sails and three rows of oars which drove the ship to the rhythm of a drum which now echoed in his ears. At the prow he saw an Eye-of-the-Gods, escorted by Executors. At once he filled his lungs with air, gave Liriana an urgent look and went under water. She did the same a moment later.

The ship went on with no indication that it was going to stop. It was heading downriver to cross the Boundary. This was exactly what Ikai was waiting for. Barely submerged, he watched the scene, holding his breath. The Eye on board the ship opened the book in his hands and began to send silver flashes towards the pier. Above his head Ikai saw the flashes being answered by others of the same intensity and color. The light coming from the ship met that from the pier and some kind of communication took place.

Suddenly a tremendous buzz assailed his ears. Everything around him began to tremble, as if an earthquake were beginning. The pier, the water, the river itself, seemed to writhe with convulsions. He had to resurface to breathe, and tried to control his body as it was shaken violently by the tremors. Liriana surfaced beside him with the water sliding down her ashen face.

There came a loud blast of golden light in the middle of the river, at the level of the pier. Ikai and Liriana turned towards the blinding light. A huge circle became visible, rising to the sky in the center of the river. Ikai dived and watched the lower part of the great golden circle, which cut the waters

like a divine disc. The ship headed for the center of the phenomenon. Ikai surfaced, shook his head to get the water out of his face and hair, and whispered:

“They’ve opened a way through in the barrier. It’s now or never.”

He took a deep breath, motioning to Liriana to do the same. She understood and filled her lungs with the night air. He slipped under and with all the strength of his arms and legs swam towards the golden circle. Liriana followed him closely. He looked to his right and saw the hull of the big ship with the oars going in and out of the water. They were crossing the opening in the barrier.

We must hurry, or it’ll close before we make it.

He swam underwater with all the skill of an experienced Hunter. He reached the lower rim of the golden opening and checked that his Ring did not tremble. He hesitated. Crossing under water was extremely risky. If he lost consciousness he would drown. The ship moved forward beside him and pushed him to one side.

There’s no choice, it’s almost finished crossing. It’ll have to be now, or else the passage will close and we’ll lose our chance. Damn, we have to risk it!

He waited for Liriana to catch up with him, then looked her in the eye and grabbed her left wrist. He gazed at her for an instant: she floated gently in the deep, barely visible, part of her face and body bathed in that luminescence. Her life was now in his hands. *It’ll work, it has to work!* he said to encourage himself. He waited no more. He stretched out his left arm until it crossed the golden circle. He narrowed his eyes and waited anxiously to be hit by the noxious effects of the barrier.

Nothing happened. He stretched out Liriana’s arm now and waited an instant. Nothing. *Free passage!* he said joyfully to himself. He was about to cross when he noticed a long dark wake approaching them from the other side of the barrier. He hesitated. What on earth was this? Two huge golden eyes above a mouth with a viper-like tongue and two formidable fangs appeared before him. His blood froze at the sight of the long scaly silver body.

It was a water snake! A gigantic one! Fear overcame him so suddenly that he nearly opened his mouth to shout, and drown in the process. Then he remembered that animals did not go near the barrier, they drew back from

it. He was wrong. That beast, which looked like something out of some drunken sailor’s nightmare, crossed the open passage and went straight for them. He realized with horror that it was the work of the Gods, that the water monster was there to keep watch. For a fraction of a moment he pondered what to do, then he acted. He pushed his body forward to attract the attention of the beast with powerful kicks, and Liriana followed him. Just before crossing the barrier he turned and went back. The snake attacked him. It closed its jaws and grazed his boot as he swam with all his might in the opposite direction. Liriana, with the momentum she had gained, crossed to the other side. She tried to turn back, but the barrier snapped shut behind her.

Ikai looked back and saw the ship and Liriana on the other side of the barrier. He knew it had closed. The beast, faster than he was himself, drew level with him and tried to coil itself around him. He reacted, brought out his dagger and stabbed the scaly body. The monster let go. It turned to face him, threatening him with its fangs. He had no air left in his lungs. If he emerged to breathe he would be discovered by the Executors. If he fought against the monster he would perish. And then he remembered his father’s advice: *when all seems lost, do the unthinkable.* And so he did. He swerved, avoiding the fangs which grazed his arm, then with his last strength and his lungs about to burst, headed straight for the barrier. The water snake followed him, trying to sink its fangs into his body.

Protect me, Oxatsi, dear Mother Sea.

He struck the barrier. Pain and convulsions hit him with the force of a tornado.

Water filled his lungs.

And he fainted.

Ikai woke up to feel someone beating on his chest.

“Come on! Come back to me!”

He recognized Lirana’s voice, but had no idea where he was or what had happened. A violent fit of gagging overcame him, and he vomited water.

“Breathe! Come on!”

He twisted onto his side and threw up all the water in his lungs and stomach in a series of violent heaves.

“Thanks to Girlai, our Father Moon!”

The image of the great water-snake came back to his mind, and the shock forced him to sit up.

“Easy, we’re safe,” Liriana reassured him.

He noticed they were among trees, not far from the river. “What happened?” he asked.

“You nearly drowned. You really scared me, but you saved us both from that horrible beast. I thought you wouldn’t make it. I’m thankful beyond words.”

“I managed to get across…”

“Yes, your Ring flashed and then you started convulsing as you were crossing, and you fainted. I had to bring you out. You were going down, and almost dragged both of us. It’s a miracle that we’re safe. I thought we were both going to drown, but I managed to push you up and we floated. The beast didn’t manage to cross, it got caught on the other side.”

“Thanks…”

“No, thank *you* and that head of yours. The trick worked. You think fast and well.”

Ikai tried to smile. His lungs and stomach ached terribly.

Liriana looked out toward the outpost of the Enforcers of the Gods.

“They haven’t seen us, but we’d better get going.”

We managed to cross. Ikai could hardly believe it. It was true that luck smiles on those who dare, or perhaps on fools, because what they had done had definitely been foolish. But they had done it. They went on for a few hours, putting distance between them and the outpost. Ikai did not feel they were being followed. Even so, he made use of his knowledge and took all kind of precautions, hiding the trail they left behind as much as he could. They camped in the woods, not far from the river.

“Thank you again,” Liriana said as she handed him a slice of cheese.

He smiled. “There’s nothing to be thankful for. A deal is a deal. I gave you my word, and I always keep it.”

“It was an excellent plan, except for the encounter with that nightmarish beast,” she said. She tilted her head and studied him carefully. He became aware of the scrutiny.

“A lucky improvisation, more like. We’ve been very lucky, that’s all.”

She shook her head. “Luck didn’t have much to do with all this. You had it all planned in that head of yours and in the end you improvised, daringly and coolly. Gedrel had already seen that in you.”

He shrugged. In his view, all he had done was opt for the most rational choice. Nothing more. They ate in silence, eyeing each other. Two fugitives measuring the partner their flight had imposed on them.

Liriana rubbed her hands together. The cool of the night was beginning to take its toll on their bodies. “It’s a shame we can’t light a fire,” she said.

“It’s not safe. They might see us.”

“The Enforces of the Gods? I don’t think they’re looking for us.”

Ikai cast a glance around. “No, not them. Out here, on the other side of the Boundary, there are very dangerous… creatures…”

Unconsciously he put his hand to his side. It had healed, but it was still sore.

“Creatures? You mean beasts like that giant water snake?”

Ikai sighed. “Yes, and worse.”

“Worse? I don’t follow, what’s out here? What are we up against?”

“I’ll tell you, then you’ll understand.”

Liriana put her satchel to one side to give him all her attention. He told her what had happened when he was wounded by the creature during the hunting mission, and showed her the wounds it had given him. He deliberately omitted the fugitives who had somehow managed to cross. He did not trust her well enough to reveal such crucial and dangerous information.

“It’s a frightening thing to happen,” she said, shaking her head.

“Let’s hope we don’t have to re-live it,” he said with a sigh. “But we must be ready to fight, it’s very dangerous being out here. The beasts aren’t used to humans, and they attack without warning. And I’m very much afraid there are some pretty strange things lurking about…”

“I’ll be ready, you’ve already scared me enough,” she said with a shy smile.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to alarm you needlessly, but you have to understand that this side has nothing to do with what we’ve left behind. This is wild nature in all its glory, and some of the beasts of the woods and moors haven’t seen humans in more than a thousand years. I even believe some of these creatures have never been seen before, and it wouldn’t surprise me if the Gods had something to do with it all.”

“You really think so?”

“What attacked me wasn’t natural… nor was that water snake…”

“Then we’d better take all the precautions we can,” Liriana offered, and unsheathed her sword and dagger. “I’ll take the first watch.”

Ikai agreed, and they rested. Dawn came with a cool breeze, and they were soon ready to continue their march. He searched the area and found wild berries and edible plants for breakfast, which their stomachs were grateful for.

“Where to?” he asked Liriana as he let a few blades of grass fall through his fingers to determine the direction of the wind.

Her turquoise gaze scanned the waters. “We go downriver,” she said.

He found her vagueness unsettling. “Where are we heading for?” he asked.

“You’ll see when we get there,” she said without a glance at him in that curt, military tone he disliked so much.

Without waiting for a reply she set off. She stopped for a moment to look back at him. “It’s several days’ journey, so you’d better make up your mind. We don’t have time to argue.”

Ikai sighed deeply. At that particular moment he was glad he did not have his sister’s temperament. They went on following the river for days, like two explorers trying to find the mouth of that enormous blue snake. With each day of the journey the coolness between Hunter and Captain subsided, like a camp fire during the night, turning into embers by dawn. Ikai, making use of his skills as a Hunter, was in charge of finding food and scanning the area to make sure they did not stumble on any danger. Liriana set up camp, prepared the food and insisted on doing double watches to compensate for her poor skills in the field, something she had been forced to admit between gritted teeth.

The first days of their journey were quiet, until they came upon half a dozen gray wolves. Those wolves, much more aggressive and savage than any Ikai had ever encountered before, turned on them and attacked. They managed to repel them by climbing up an elm tree and shooting arrows from above. They managed to make the wolves run away after wounding a couple of them, but he was left with an unease in the pit of his stomach. Normal wolves would not have attacked them like that. Further ahead they saw a black bear in the distance, not close enough to pose any danger, but even so they hid immediately. The bear was huge, and he had another very bad feeling. Luckily they were upwind of it, and the beast did not discover them. No other incidents had followed.

On the other hand, Ikai was delighted with the unusual richness of the fauna and flora around them. He was fascinated. The wonderful landscape was covered with vivid growth: foliage, tree-trunks, ground, even rocks were lined with intense lush green. The wild fragrances were as exotic as they were vibrant. All his senses were overwhelmed by new and exciting sensations which bewitched him. Every day he found plants, berries and vegetation he had never before seen. Birds of lively colors and enormous size crossed the sky, and he could do nothing but gaze open-mouthed at that beauty. Most of the time he was not even carrying his bow at the ready, instead gazing around him, spellbound. Even Liriana, who was not such an avid lover of nature, was astonished at the exotic beauty they were encountering. He would have given anything to be able to stay and study that wonderful habitat, but he could not. They had to go on.

It was nightfall when he returned to the camp. They had reached a placid lake in the center of which was a small island with a huge white boulder. The boulder looked like a standing man. The place was certainly picturesque. They had glimpsed it the previous day when they reached the top of the plateau, and Liriana had insisted it would be a great place to camp. Ikai preferred somewhere more sheltered and easily protected to spend the night, but she had been adamant and he had finally agreed.

“What did you catch today?” she asked with a welcoming smile.

“Don’t fret, I didn’t fish,” he replied with a trace of amusement. He knew now that she hated fish. Something really odd for one of the Senoca, as fish was considered a scarce delicacy, the food of Oxatsi Mother Sea,

even though they could only enjoy the freshwater variety. He raised his hand to show her four hares he had caught with string traps.

“To the West, behind the woods, there’s a wide open plain covered with scrub,” he explained with a shrug and a smile. “Perfect for catching these little ones, they’re fast but they’re also curious.”

“I’d have preferred partridges…” she said with a smile, and her eyes shone with that bewitching turquoise.

One look from Liriana and he relaxed completely, lowering his guard as if all worries had vanished, as if he were bathing in a warm pool of celestial water. That worried him; he could not afford to lower his guard. He blinked hard.

“I saw some birds that might have been edible, but I didn’t dare catch them I have no idea what they are, but they were very big. A lot of the fauna is huge…”

Liriana shrugged. “It’s the first time I’ve been out here, and to me this whole landscape is incredible.

“I’ve been out here several times on hunting missions, but we never went far from the Boundary, not more than a couple of days…”

“Here, give me those,” Liriana said, reaching out for the catch. “I’ll prepare them for the way. One good thing they teach you in the Guard, apart from killing, is to ration and preserve the food.” She gave him a wink.

“Thank goodness they teach you something halfway useful in the Guard…”

The water-skin flew over the fire and hit him on the head. He laughed, picked it up and took a swig at it, feeling cheerful. While Liriana used her knife on the prey at her feet Ikai could not help but note her legs again. Strong and well-shaped. For some reason he found them very sensuous. He did not have much experience with women, and what little he had had not turned out well. He remembered with a pang of sadness how all the girls in the village had shunned him the moment they found out he was going to be a Hunter. It was natural. He recalled that awful day. For a moment he had dreamed she would understand, that she would accept his reasons and not turn her back on him. But he had been wrong. With the sun falling on her golden hair, Miria had looked back at him with those eyes as blue as the sky, and rejected him. The girl Ikai had been in love with since they were children, the only woman his heart yearned for, had turned her back on him

as if he were a leper, as if who he really was, his soul, had changed. He had not changed, he was the one who had loved her every single day up to that ill-fated one. But Miria no longer saw Ikai the farmer; she saw a Hunter, a man repudiated by all, the enemy. And that was why she had rejected him. That day something inside him had broken, bringing with it a pain which did not cease for a long time. It almost consumed him when Kyra told him that Miria was marrying the smith's son. But one learns to live with pain and he overcame it, persevered and won. He had healed and it no longer hurt… almost.

"Haven't you ever seen nice legs before, Hunter?"

Ikai noticed in horror that he had been staring at Liriana's legs while he was lost in thought.

"No… I was… sorry… lost in my own thoughts…" he tried to explain, red spreading across his cheeks.

Liriana smiled in amusement. "Easy, you'll choke. Don't worry, I'm used to men looking at me. I belong to the Guard, remember? I know I have pretty legs… for some. For most they're too muscular, from what they've told me. You seem to be the first type." She gave him a roguish smile.

"I… no…" he choked. "I mean, of course they're pretty, but I wasn't…" he mumbled.

"Easy, I understand. Take a breath," she said with a laugh.

Ikai managed to recover a little from the uncomfortable situation. Red as a tomato, he tried to sort things out.

"I swear I wasn't looking at you that way…"

"No? Don't you like my legs? Are you saying I'm not a sensual woman, that I'm not good to look at? Is it my haircut? That's it, right? Too masculine for your taste?" Her tone seemed very serious now, and her eyes were fixed on him.

Ikai was nonplussed. He had no idea what to do or say. His cheeks were burning, his head felt as though it was about to burst and he feared that anything he said would make things worse.

A tense silence fell between them.

Liriana broke it, laughing whole-heartedly. She held her stomach as she doubled up with glee. Ikai stared at her and realized the Captain had played him as if he were a little boy. He felt horribly ashamed, but he could

not help laughing too. The two young fugitives laughed, letting the pleasant feeling it gave their spirits spread throughout their bodies.

They ate in silence, exchanging furtive glances as they enjoyed the meat, which they accompanied with some strong cheese left over from their supplies.

She held up the leg of a hare. “Oh, I’d give anything for a good wine to go with this,” she said.

“Are you from a good family?” Ikai asked

“You say that because of what I said about the wine? No, I’m not used to enjoying it. I’m the daughter of a woodsman. My father still works in the forest, it’s either that or die. The Eyes are particularly keen when it comes to the amounts of wood they require from woodsmen. I don’t know what they want so much wood for, but they make them cut trees down non-stop. The fever took my mother when I was five… she was a beautiful woman, from what I’ve been told.”

“I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to…”

Liriana shook her head. “Don’t worry, it was a long time ago… I was happy working in the mountains with my father. Unfortunately I was called up for a Quota of the Guard. They recruited me for my skill with the axe and my physical strength. When you spend your whole life felling trees, you acquire certain abilities…” She showed Ikai her strong, clearly marked biceps, which made his eyes almost pop out of their sockets. “And, of course, your favorites,” she added, showing him her leg muscles.

Ikai smiled and shrugged by way of apologizing. An owl hooted and they both tried to locate it in the night.

“I thought you might be some relative of Gedrel’s.”

Liriana’s face lit up at the mention of the old man’s name. “I wish I was, he’s a great man. His leadership and wisdom are invaluable for all of us. There’s nobody I admire more. Don’t get me wrong, I love my own father very much. He’s a good man, hard-working and loving, but he hasn’t got the spirit required to bring our people out of the slavery it’s suffered over a thousand years. For that you need a very special man, a rarity among common men. Gedrel will guide us to freedom. It’ll be a tough journey, very tough, but I’m convinced he’ll triumph. We’ll get back the freedom they stole from us.”

“That’s a dangerous view…”

“I know you don’t share it, but look around you, what do you see?”

Ikai looked around him for a long moment. He sighed.

“You see and feel it just like me: we’re surrounded by freedom. Absolute freedom! Fill your lungs with the night air, with this aroma of freedom. This whole exotic landscape oozes freedom.”

“You’re a dreamer…”

Liriana spread her arms wide. “And why not dream, Ikai? Why not wish we could all live out here, free of the Gods, breathing and enjoying this freedom through every pore of our bodies? Why not, Ikai?”

He wanted to reply, but he kept quiet. He knew the Gods would not allow it, ever. “Tell me, why are you headed for the Eternal City? Shouldn’t you be with Gedrel, helping him make this dream come true?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Going to the dwelling of the Gods?”

“Yes. There’s a lot you don’t know, Ikai. You’re not the only one who’s been robbed of a loved one. Someone who’s crucial to the lives of many.”

Ikai gazed at her. Her turquoise eyes were drowned in deep sorrow. Seeing the pain and realizing he would not get any more information, he changed the subject and asked her something he had been puzzling over for a while. Every time he asked her about it, she evaded the question.

“How long till we reach our destination?”

An honest smile of acknowledgement was what she gave him in return. He frowned in surprise. He had expected a negative reaction to the question. She waved her hand at the island in the middle of the lake.

“We’re there? But… there’s nothing! Only a big white boulder with the shape of a man.”

“Travel downriver until you reach the white man standing on the lake.”

Ikai stared at the island and the big white boulder, visible even in the middle of the night under the light of the stars. And then he realized. “Now I get it. It’s a mark, a meeting point. Not the final destination. Who are we going to meet with here?”

Liriana nodded and smiled. “I have to admit, you’re smart.”

At that moment the owl took flight. Ikai turned his head towards the trees where the flapping had come from. His heart stopped. The reason for the owl’s sudden flight emerged from the underbrush: a giant white tiger

was watching them with its enormous cat eyes. It took him an instant to react; the beast was too big. He thought at first that his eyes were deceiving him with the light of the fire. It was impossible, it was ten paces away from the camp and it was as big as a working horse. He half-closed his eyes, unable to believe what he was seeing.

“By the seas! It’s huge!” Liriana cried.

And he reacted. He rolled over and grabbed his bow. Liriana stood up and unsheathed sword and dagger.

Defiantly, the great beast roared, showing enormous fangs.

Trying not to let fear overpower him, Ikai nocked an arrow. The animal took a step forward, its white-furred body shining in the night. It had ice-blue eyes, and in the firelight he could see the black stripes which marked its white skin. But what frightened him most was the gleam of those enormous cat eyes: it was not natural but strangely golden.

“Take cover behind the fire!” he said to Liriana as he too drew back.

The beast took another lazy step towards the fire and the flames illuminated it in all its splendor. It was massive. Its head alone was as big as a cartwheel. Ikai raised his bow and aimed through the flames. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the beast had come out to hunt, and they were its prey. He glanced at Liriana, who was wielding her weapons nervously.

The great beast took one more step, then with amazing speed for such a huge animal it attacked. Ikai reacted and let fly an arrow. The tiger leapt over the fire and lunged at them. He rolled to the left and saw Liriana roll in the opposite direction. The beast roared and clawed at his head. The claws brushed his hair as he threw himself to one side to avoid them. Liriana went to his help and drove her sword into the beast’s rump with a powerful thrust. The great tiger roared and leapt to one side, then faced Liriana and launched itself at her in a powerful leap. It knocked her down with a terrible blow.

In desperation he shouted like a madman to attract the beast’s attention before it put an end to Liriana. The enormous head turned and stared at him, showing its fangs, challenging him. Under its body lay Liriana. The tiger roared with a sudden whimper, as if hurt. A black arrow was standing out from its back. Ikai, dumbfounded, looked at Liriana on the ground. It could not have been her, and there was no one in sight in the clearing. He had no idea where the arrow had come from, but he seized his chance. He grabbed

a burning branch and waved it, screaming like one possessed, trying to scare the beast. Another arrow pierced the snow-white skin of the tiger. The animal felt the wound and withdrew in confusion. It turned its head in all directions, but like Ikai, could not find the aggressor. It began to claw in Ikai's direction while it roared in confusion, ears flattened against its head and eyes glaring with fury. He grabbed another burning branch from the fire and exchanged it for his sword.

The tiger decided to attack. It jumped towards him, and he met it with fire. The huge fangs searched for his face, but he stood his ground and plunged the fiery branch into the beast's mouth an instant before it bore down on him. He went flying over the ground amid a sea of sparks and felt a lacerating pain in his chest. He drove one knee down and got out his throwing knife.

The beast watched him from two paces away. It was about to finish him when another arrow hit it, in the same spot as the others. It roared at the night sky, a sound so terrifying and loud it silenced any other sound on the plain. The great white tiger, badly wounded, roared for a last time, as if it were letting him know things were not over yet, withdrew into the thick undergrowth and disappeared.

Ikai fell to one side, badly hurt. Liriana tried to stand up, but failed.

A dark mist which mingled with the night shadows approached slowly. Ikai watched the unusual spectacle of black mist merging with the night. Immediately he sensed danger and looked for his dagger. A figure emerged from the blackness, as if appearing from the shadows of night itself, and came up to them, bow in hand. Ikai made out the stranger more clearly, five paces away. He tried to defend himself, but his chest was in agony. He grasped his throwing dagger and waited until he had him at arm's reach, even though he doubted he could throw.

"You can drop the knife," a hoarse voice said.

He stared at the stranger, who was wrapped in a black hooded cloak. "And why should I… do that?" he managed to articulate.

"Because it's me you've come to find," said the stranger, and pushed back the hood to reveal her face.

"Albana! Thank the seas!" Liriana cried.

Ikai looked at the young woman's intense black almond-shaped eyes, the jet-black hair, the face which radiated fierceness, and he remembered

her betrayal of him in the Dungeons of Oblivion.

“You, damn you!” he muttered.

“You can thank me later, Hunter. Come on, get up! Let’s get away before it comes back!”

18

The convoy advanced along the great bridge which gave access to the Fifth Ring of the Eternal City. The viaduct was an architectural structure both enormous and regal, ornamented with countless details sculpted on its white granite. From the open cart drawn by chargers, Idana was gazing at the turquoise waters which separated the fourth and fifth rings flowing beneath her. She looked ahead and noticed the guards standing at the end of the bridge. They guarded the entrance to the outer ring, with behind it the high wall which separated them from the immensity of the ocean.

Idana sighed in resignation. *That's where we arrived, crossing the great waterfall… I have a nasty feeling we'll never manage to get out of here. Not alive,* she thought, remembering the journey which had brought them to the city of the Gods.

Those guards were huge, bigger and stronger than the Executors. They had the same brownish ochre skin, with thick black veins marking their bodies. But what caught Idana's attention most was the helmets they wore: similar to those of the Executors, but with a visor made up of two facing sharp-edged half-moons, one in front of each eye. It was as if their eyes were protected by the blades of two curved, vertical daggers. The guards were armed with short white spears and protected by round shields, huge and slightly oval, which covered practically their entire bodies. On the shields was an engraving of rough waves against a background of the sea. They wore sky-blue tunics which reached to their thighs, and over it their upper bodies were protected by rigid cuirasses of indigo-blue decorated with strange runes in black. Matching gauntlets and grieves protected forearms and legs. Dark blue capes hung from their shoulders but did not reach the floor.

Ugh… I get the shivers just looking at them. They're dreadful, and that brutal power they radiate is terrible. She felt fear, like a claw digging into her neck. She tried to see their eyes and could only make out golden dots, one in each of the half-moons. She shivered with apprehension and lowered her head.

The Eye-of-the-God who led the convoy, standing in a light carriage pulled by two black chargers, reached the guards. He stopped and saluted.

“Custodians, I request entry to the Fifth Ring,” he said in his creaking voice. “Your Lord Saxti, heir to the crown of the House of Aru, is waiting for us.”

The two Custodians exchanged brief looks, then nodded. The Eye turned and gave the order to continue. He shook the reins and the horses set off again and entered the Ring. Idana met the frightened eyes of Kata, the other Selected from the Summoning. With a great effort Idana smiled at her, trying to convey some support, wishing to spare her the fear she herself was feeling at that moment. But the four Executors with them in the cart and the other two at the back of the group in another light carriage did not make the task easy.

“Cheer up. It’s all going to be all right.”

“Where are they taking us? Where are the others?”

“I don’t know.” Idana glanced down at the white tunic she was wearing. It came down to her knees. In the center of her chest was embroidered a strange golden rune, which looked ominous.

“Why have we been dressed like this?” Kata asked.

“It’s better than the paint,” said Idana with a smile.

“Yes, that’s true. I was painted yellow. What about you?”

“Orange. I wonder what it means…”

“Me too…” Kata hugged her shoulders and shivered.

“Don’t worry, we’ve survived till now. Let’s go on like this. If they want something from us, let me do the talking. I’ll try to keep anything bad from happening to you, I promise.”

Kata nodded nervously. Idana noticed, and understood her unease. As they advanced along a wide avenue, Idana began to notice some odd details. The first and most remarkable was that this avenue was one of the few made of stone, in that ring. Most of the routes inside the Ring were channels and water lanes, busy with innumerable small vessels. Carriages were the exception there, as boats seemed to be the usual form of transportation. The second thing which caught her attention was that the marble-white ground was damp, as if it had rained only a moment before.

Idana glanced up at the sun, radiant above their heads, then back down at the floor.

How strange, it hasn't rained, but the sun doesn't seem to dry the dampness, she wondered as she noticed the fine layer of water covering the causeway. Something else even more curious began to make its presence felt. She touched her arm and saw it was wet. *Dew, a constant dew, hardly noticeable.* She touched her forehead and it too was wet. *It's light and warm, that's why we don't notice it. Strange and fascinating.* If she had not been so scared that her stomach hurt, she would have enjoyed those discoveries. But the fear she felt for her own life and Kata's did not allow her to find much enjoyment in all this.

Kata was staring around with pure incredulity on her face. They were surrounded by immense palaces with façades of sky-blue marble and granite, each more impressive and regal than the one before, as if this were a competition to be the most ostentatious. Hieratic Custodians guarded the entrances to these mansions, which were built out of great round columns which rose to unthinkable heights. Idana had to cover her eyes from the sun to make out the pyramidal roofs of those immense buildings. She saw an enormous palace with water falling from its roof to bathe all its walls. The entrance had been designed to be a waterfall which fell from an amazing height, covering the whole width of the building. *Beautiful and crazy!*

If the buildings left the onlooker breathless, their gardens rivaled them in splendor. Each palace was surrounded by gardens, with lakes and fountains of incredible beauty. The lake they were passing suggested infinite calm and was an enchanting blue, surrounded by many-colored flowers which Idana had never seen before. In the garden of the next palace was a triangle made up of three fabulous fountains carved in granite, and behind them a waterfall of crystal-clear water fed by a stream surrounding the whole property.

Kata stared open-mouthed at a colossal mansion built in the middle of an island in a huge lake, with a dock, right there on the other side of the avenue. The buildings and gardens the Gods had built were absolutely unbelievable, surreal. And joining them all there ran countless channels and water lanes.

"They must be the homes of the Gods," Kata said.

The people Idana saw were Custodians, Eyes-of-the-Gods, but mostly slaves. They carried loads or worked unceasingly tending gardens and waterways. She did not see any Golden God.

“Yes, they must be, they don’t seem to walk the streets…”

They passed before a palace under construction and Idana’s spirits sank. Hundreds of slaves were working under the Oppressors’ whips, dragging great blocks of granite and loads of wood. They were all dressed the same way: very dark brown, almost black tunics and long deep blue headscarves which fell to their shoulders, tied with a leather strip. Idana could not make out their faces, but the sound of the whips and the moaning of the slaves reached her perfectly clearly.

“There are our men,” Kata said with a nod of her head towards them. “This is what they took them for.”

“There, and in everything they need to build this crazy splendor…” Idana said bleakly, looking at the great blocks of granite and marble. She knew they came from quarries and that many more of their men served in them.

The Eye picked up speed. Soon they found themselves in front of the biggest palace of all: an immense, regal castle with twelve interminable towers rising to the sky. Its walls, sky-blue mottled with white, seemed to weep a torrent of crystal tears which flowed smoothly to the base. Idana was left open-mouthed. The sovereign fortress was completely surrounded by water, floating on a turquoise sea. It seemed an image from some idyllic dream, except for her presentiment that forced labor, rape, torture or death awaited them there —if not all of those things. She sighed, braced herself and held the other girl’s hands.

“Don’t worry, it’ll all be fine.”

“Do you really think so?” Kata asked. There was a hopeful prayer in her eyes.

“Yes, I believe it,” Idana lied, forcing a cheerful smile. She was trying to protect the poor girl, since there was nothing else she could do.

From the water slowly emerged a bridge which joined the avenue to the palace gate. Both prisoners watched, spellbound. The convoy crossed the bridge and entered the castle until they reached a great round uncovered courtyard. Here they stopped. The Eye in charge of the procession conferred with another Eye who came out to greet them. A dozen

Custodians accompanied him. They were taken down from the cart and delivered. The Eye and the Executors who had taken them there turned on their heels and left immediately.

Idana looked around the courtyard. On one side were slaves tending to the horses, and further down more slaves were sweeping floors and cleaning walls with forced energy.

To work here cleaning like a slave for the rest of my days isn't such a horrible end after all, she thought when she saw them. She was trying not to think of worse alternatives.

"Follow me in silence," the Eye said in that squeaking unpleasant voice, and led the way.

Idana soon lost her sense of direction, as the castle was a true labyrinth of chambers, ante-chambers, endless corridors and different levels of spiral staircases. She was aware of a strong presence of Custodians on guard in all the corridors and rooms. Safety seemed to worry the Golden Gods who lived there. The dampness was very obvious inside; the walls seemed to be sweating, and as they went on they seemed to be walking on a thin layer of water.

Suddenly a door opened on Idana's left and the Eye stopped at once. The four Custodians with them straightened. A Golden God in all his splendor came out of the room. The God only wore a silver kilt, leaving the rest of his body bare. Idana was astonished, not only at the sight of the God but for what her eyes glimpsed in the chamber behind him. She had to blink hard and focus on what was going on inside the luxurious room. In the center was a great round bathtub with white vapor coming from it. In it half a dozen Gods were soaking, revealing their golden skins and slender bodies. With them were over twenty beautiful slave girls… naked. Idana swallowed hard and went on looking. Around the tub another half-dozen Gods were lying among cushions and silks, with more than thirty more slaves tending to them.

New slaves? the God asked the Eye, who waited with his head bent, looking at the floor.

"Yes, my Lord."

Are they for the harem? This one might satisfy us. She's not quite tall enough, but a little variety is always entertaining. He pointed to Idana.

Her heart almost stopped.

“I’m very sorry, Lord Cixta they cannot be for the Harem… they are Selected.”

Ah, true! They’re marked. I hadn’t noticed the tunic. Go ahead then, I’m sure my cousin Lord Saxti will be looking forward to receiving them.

“Thank you, my Lord,” the Eye said with a bow, not daring to look up, and went on.

Idana’s heart resumed its beating. *Not the harem! I beg you, Mother Oxatsi, not that, please!* she thought in absolute terror. She glanced at Kata, and was answered by a look of panic in the other girl’s eyes.

They arrived at a heavily guarded antechamber. The Eye stopped at the door and requested an audience, and for a long while they waited. Idana was rubbing her damp hands together, growing more and more nervous. They were finally admitted. Idana saw an intricate throne at the end of the huge hall, and guessed they were in a royal chamber. The room was extraordinary: an endless curtain of water fell down every wall, and under it rows of golden runes glowed dimly. The floor was transparent, and below it the turquoise ocean on which the castle floated could be seen. It gave the impression that they were walking directly over the sea. In the center of the room a giant fountain sent a stream of blue water towards the high dome. For some inexplicable reason the water did not fall back again.

“On the floor, slaves, you are in the presence of the Gods!” the Eye ordered excitedly in a squeaking murmur.

Idana and Kata knelt and remained with their faces on the floor and their arms stretched out. The Eye announced the retinue with an elaborate bow.

“My venerated master Lord Saxti, heir to the crown of the House of Aru. Lord Adamis, heir of the House of Eret, of the First Ring, sends you the Selected from the Harvest which by sacred ritual corresponded to your royal house.” He presented the two young women with a wave of his hand.

The God was standing before the throne. Idana recognized him, and also the muscular Warrior-God beside him. They were both dressed in soft varied shades of blue. They wore armor of an intense indigo with intricate gold and silver embroidery. But what caught Idana’s attention was not the two Golden Gods but the person occupying the throne. This was not a God but a Goddess. More slender, beautiful and delicate than the two male Gods, with extremely soft, feminine features, and almond-shaped eyes of blue-

gray which were fixed on Idana and Kata. Her skin was a slightly paler gold than that of her masculine counterparts. Her hair was white as snow, and this was the only detail which betrayed her age. The Goddess stood up, and as she did so Idana noticed something else: her body was consumed and gaunt, its extreme fragility and thinness covered by a silver and blue tunic with ornamental embroidery.

Very slowly she moved toward the two slaves, barely touching the floor with her feet. Idana watched her out of the corner of her eye, afraid she would be caught doing so. The Goddess-Queen eyed them for a long moment. Idana stopped looking and pressed her forehead on the floor.

And in the presence of the two slaves, without their being aware of it, there followed a significant conversation.

They have been selected? the Queen mentally asked Lord Saxti.

Yes, my lady mother.

What quality?

The slave on the left is Orange, the one on the right Yellow.

A pity, they might have been better. I am always optimistic about the ritual.

The harvest was not as expected. There was only one Red…

I hope she was not granted to that brainless cretin Lord Asu. His lineage is a dishonor to all our race.

No, mother. She was granted to the House of the First Ring. Even so, Lord Asu tried to make her his. It was a painful spectacle. Blood was nearly shed, but fortunately Lord Adamis saved the situation.

The House of the Second Ring and that brainless heir Lord Asu will end up starting a war. Luckily the House of the First Ring has an heir with a good brain. Watch Lord Adamis closely, my son, and Lord Asu even more so. We must watch all their movements. Remember: keep your allies close and your enemies even closer.

Yes, mother, that is what I am doing. Our relationship with Lord Adamis and his House is exceptionally good. As to Lord Asu, I keep close and watch him with the greatest attention and prudence.

You please me, son. Do we have spies well placed inside their houses?

Yes, mother. They report punctually.

The Queen nodded. She turned her attention to the two slaves, who without daring to look at her were shaking like lambs.

They will do. Take them and prepare them.

As you wish, mother.

Kneeling on the floor, Idana stared at the great sea through the transparent surface, wondering why there was such a grim silence. A terrible thought was engraved in her mind. *Not the Harem, please, not the harem.* She began to shake uncontrollably. Suddenly huge hands seized her by the shoulders and took her away.

Meanwhile, in the first ring, Kyra was gazing out from the elevated window in one of the towers on the eastern face of the great palace where she was imprisoned. She was clutching the bars with fury as she watched more than a thousand slaves pulling on ropes to raise a colossal statue of a God-Warrior. It had taken her more than an hour to make a rough count, but now she had no doubt about it: there were more than a thousand men there condemned to forced labor until they died. They all wore dark brown tunics and their heads were covered with a long whitish scarf, almost transparent, held in place by a leather strip. The whips of the Oppressors punished them while a group of Executors watched attentively. Already in the short time she had been watching half a dozen men had been removed. They had collapsed, unable to bear that brutal effort and punishment.

“Damned soulless Gods!” she muttered under her breath.

The door of the room opened with a creak, and two slave girls walked in silently with their heads bowed in a servile posture. They carried silver trays of fruit and other food. A third followed and placed a large earthen jar of what looked like wine on the white marble table. The smell of roast meat reached Kyra’s nose, and her stomach complained desperately. But something caught her attention more than the food: no Eye-of-the-God, Executor or guard of any kind accompanied the slave girls, and this puzzled her. The three turned and made to leave the room.

“Wait!”

The three girls stopped and turned, still with their heads bowed.

“Wait… who are you?”

The first of the slave girls raised her head and put her hand to her ear, then shook her index finger. Kyra, not understanding, took a step forward and stared into the girl’s blue eyes. She was surprised by the extreme pallor of her face, as if she were ill. Then she looked at the other two. And was left speechless.

Under the slave scarves which covered their heads, she realized something impossible: the skins of the two girls were not the same color as hers, the color of the Senoca. She stared at them wide-eyed. The tallest had red skin, a ruby tint which was charming. And if that girl’s face had made an impression on her, her companion’s left her speechless: it was a soft exotic green, a color she had never imagined even in dreams. How could this be? They were slaves like her, but not of her own race. There was no one within the Boundary, among the People of the Sea, with features like those. *It can’t be! The damned Priests have always told us that the Senoca are the only people in existence, chosen by the Golden Gods to serve them. There aren’t any other peoples or races.* And yet here were these three women in front of her, and none of them were like her: very far from it!

“Where… where are you from?” she stammered.

The slave girls looked at her, and one of them shrugged.

“You can’t talk? Or you don’t understand me? Say something, please!”

And at that moment a mental blow reached her. Clear and concise. She knew who was at the door.

They cannot answer you because they do not understand you.

Kyra turned to the door and saw the slender Golden God watching her with those enigmatic almond eyes of a gentle blue-gray. That damned Adamis!

The three servant girls threw themselves on the floor at once. Adamis eyed them from the door. *You may retire.* The slaves got to their feet and withdrew at once, heads bowed.

“What have you done? Did you cut their tongues out so they’re less bothersome?” Kyra snapped. She was angry not only at her own situation but with everything she was discovering, perhaps more with the latter.

Adamis threw his head back as if surprised at the question, and a smile appeared on his golden face. He shook his head and entered the room. He

was followed by the enormous bodyguard, whose powerful footsteps echoed on the floor.

“Does he follow you everywhere, like a dog?”

The face of the God-Warrior, usually a cold mask, stiffened. Kyra was sure that the comment had displeased him considerably. The bodyguard made a move towards her, but Adamis held him back.

Leave us alone, Rotec.

The Warrior exchanged a look with Adamis, and a moment later, with a nod, he left the room.

I seem to remember warning you clearly, slave, that you should learn to stay in your place or you would suffer the consequences. It is not in your best interests to insult my rivals, still less my friends. Do you never learn anything from experience? That is a very undesirable quality.

Kyra wanted to reply angrily, but something in her subconscious stopped her. *He’s right. I can’t go on letting myself be driven by my emotions, I do nothing but get into trouble. I must be smarter, think like Yosane, act like Ikai. I must think and plan before I act, before I open my blasted mouth.* She was aware that Adamis was right, but even so, she was not going to admit it.

“Friend? He must be another slave, like the thousands of slaves you exploit to death,” she said. She pointed to the great statue which had now been raised into place in front of the palace. As soon as those words were out of her mouth she wanted to stop them, but she could not. It was going to take some time and a lot of effort to gain some control over her character and her tongue.

You should not judge so lightly what you do not know. Rotec is a great friend, my best friend in fact. I would trust him with my life with my eyes closed. And he is not a slave, he is a Warrior. His caste is in charge of protecting us all, the nobles, the Royal House and its members. He fights the battles in the event of a confrontation, and leads the army of my House.

“Of your House? Are you royalty?”

Adamis smiled and went up to the food. *You should control that tongue of yours, slave. Showing respect is not a sign of submission but one of intelligence. I would remind you that the fish dies by the mouth.*

Kyra felt a pang of shame, but hid it immediately. Adamis and all the Gods were no more than ruthless slavers and assassins. But she had to think and act without being carried away by her character, and so she would. *Survive and escape, that's what matters.* She began to kneel, aware that she was now a slave in the presence of a God she had offended. Adamis watched her, and his eyes showed surprise. With a wave of his hand he indicated her to rise.

That is not necessary. You should eat, you need it. He picked a grape and put it in his mouth. *It is delicious,* he said, laughing, *and as you can see I am not trying to poison you.*

Her stomach rumbled again. But she resisted. She had to find out as much as she could; eating was secondary. She needed to gather all the information she could. It would help her escape from this horrible city. Adamis had shown her kindness. She did not know the reason, but there had to be one, and an important one at that, otherwise a God would never waste his valuable time with a dirty slave girl like her. There were thousands of them there, and as she had just discovered, even of different races, and much more beautiful than she was. But she would find out the reason later on, it did not bother her right now. Now she had to understand the basics of what was going on around her, since she needed it to plan a way of escape. And escape she would. By Girlai, Father Moon, she would! She breathed deeply and let out a long sigh.

"You're right, my manners have not been correct… and I apologize."

Adamis watched her in surprise. His head tilted to one side and he looked her up and down. Then he smiled.

To answer your former question: yes, I am royalty, he said with a small bow. *Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Adamis, Prince Heir of the House of Eret, of the First Ring.*

Not knowing what to do, Kyra simply stared at him. Then a doubt assailed her and she asked: "Are all the Gods… Lords?"

No, not all of them. There are different castes. Among the Gods, as you call us, there are three castes. The first is made up of the Royal family of each House, in charge of ruling the destinies of their subjects, the wellbeing and prosperity of their kingdom. That is its function and reason of being. All the Royal Family, all its members, put the wellbeing of the House before other personal priorities. I owe myself to my House and my people, first and

above all else. The second caste is made up of Lords, who are devoted to different tasks necessary for the good functioning and prosperity of the House, from Generals to Erudites and all Nobles. But they all belong to the House and owe themselves to it. Lastly the third caste, the most populous: the Commons. The majority of these are Warriors, Sailors, Healers, Merchants and Craftsmen.

Kyra, a little calmer now, went over to the table and took a roast chicken leg. Adamis poured himself a glass of wine and tasted it, looking at the great statue through the window. Knowing he was not looking at her, she gulped down the food like a wild animal; she was ravenous. She ate until her stomach ached. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her tunic, and once again her mind bubbled over with questions.

"And what makes a God belong to one Caste or another?" she asked, more to herself than to Adamis.

Adamis turned. *Power. Each God's degree of Power determines to which caste he will be assigned. I do not wish to bore you with the details. Let us say there is a ceremony where the amount of Power in each of us is determined and we are placed into one or another. Of course, to belong to the First Caste also requires royal blood. But the power is very strong in those of our lineage.*

She stared at him, deeply intrigued.

"The power…?"

Adamis smiled. *That which makes us into Gods in your eyes.*

"I don't understand," she said, struggling to make sense of this.

I will show you. It is easier to understand this way.

He showed her his hand. Then he turned it in the air, and his lips moved as he pronounced something unintelligible but real. Suddenly a white mist began to form at her feet. It was an odd mist which began to coil around her body, enveloping her in it. She began to feel afraid. It was unnatural. The mist seemed to have a life of its own, as if it were a specter, a ghost. Adamis made a gesture, raising two fingers and turning his wrist. And she began to rise towards the ceiling. Terrified, she started to scream, but the mist went on levitating her body. She went up and up. Mere inches from the ceiling, the mist stopped and she was left suspended, looking at him with her eyes wide with panic.

"I understand! I understand! Bring me down!"

Adamis watched her in amusement. And laughed. Then, gently, he brought her down again. Kyra was left sitting on the floor, panting, with her heart beating wildly.

“Why are you showing me all this? I’m nothing but a slave, and you’re a God! You can do anything you want with me at any given moment, and you know it!”

Adamis folded his arms. *Yes, I know.*

“And so?” she asked in puzzlement.

You will soon find out, he said with a crooked smile, and turning his back on her he left the room. The door closed behind him.

Damn!

19

Ikai was watching the two women at the bottom of the ravine out of the corner of his eye. He was pretending to fill the water-skin in the brook, listening attentively to the conversation behind him. They had been walking all night, silently to get away from the great wounded beast. It might come back, or even worse, do so together with its mate. It was already morning and the sun was filtering through the tops of the thick mossy beech trees. The whole forest was a tapestry of intense green, brilliant and exotic. He strained his ears. He needed to understand what on earth was going on; he did not like spying, but he had no choice.

He watched Albana closely. He could not believe the woman who had betrayed him was there. But it was her; the almond-shaped eyes, black as night, and the jet-black hair which she now wore loose half-way down her back, were unmistakable. How could she possibly know Liriana? He moistened his neck and tried to freshen up body and spirit. Strange coincidences: he did not like that at all. The cat-like brunette had betrayed him in order to escape from the Guard which Liriana belonged to. It made no sense. He shook his head involuntarily. Too many secrets, too many things that did not fit together. During the whole journey with Liriana, he had believed they were heading to a specific place. She had said nothing to make him think otherwise. Now he knew they had been coming to meet Albana. Why?

Albana fixed her intense eyes on his own. “The questions are nagging at your insides, aren’t they, Hunter?” she said caustically.

“You should have told me we were coming to meet her,” he said reproachfully to Liriana.

She shrugged it off. “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a big one,” he replied sharply. “That woman betrayed me.” He stabbed a finger towards her. “It was her who turned me in to the Guard, and it almost cost me my life.”

“Albana is with me,” Liriana said in her curt military tone of voice. “I answer for her, that’s all you need to know.”

“As far as I’m concerned she’s a traitor. And I don’t forgive treason. Ever.”

Liriana folded her arms and sighed. “You want to get to the Eternal City, and I’ve led you here, to her. Now she’s going to guide us on the last stage of the journey.”

“I don’t trust her. I never will.”

“What a shame! We can’t be friends,” Albana said, and smiled sarcastically. “Well now, I don’t like eyes like yours, one of each color. I think that’s a real pity, but it doesn’t change things.”

Ikai rarely allowed his emotions to drive him, but he put his hand on the pommel of his sword in anger. Like lightning, Albana took an arrow out of her quiver and nocked it. She aimed it at Ikai’s chest so fast he was taken by surprise.

“Stop! Both of you!” snapped Liriana, raising her hands and getting in between them. “I’m the leader of this expedition, and I make the decisions. Albana’s our guide. If you kill her we’ll never reach the Eternal City and we’ll both have failed. Do you understand? Nod if you do.”

The young man wanted to reply, but clenched his fists and thought better of it. He needed to reach his sister; everything else was secondary. He said nothing, looked at Liriana and nodded slowly.

“Albana, I give the orders. No bloodshed.”

The other woman shook her hair, nodded and lowered the bow.

“Very well,” Liriana said with a sigh. “And now let’s take a little rest. We need it.”

“Is this area safe?” she asked Albana.

“As safe as the jungle can be. There are no guarantees here. We’re surrounded by wild nature, and there are any number of dangers hidden in it. Don’t worry, I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Liriana scanned the ravine, arms akimbo. “We’ll camp here, then.”

When he heard the order Ikai let himself fall back against one of the huge beech trees and inhaled the scented air of the forest. It filled his mind with pleasant scents, exotic, different from the forests inside the Boundary. He was feeling weak, very weak. Why? Suddenly doubtful, he began to

take off the reinforced leather cuirass he was wearing. Gedrel had found them dark clothes and light armor for the journey. When he inspected it he found three big slashes running from side to side. He took it off and put it aside, then took off his black woolen shirt. He checked his torso. There were three cuts on his chest. One of them was still bleeding. That explained his weakness. With the intensity of the fight and the urgency of the escape he had completely forgotten that the beast had got him.

“You’re wounded!” Liriana cried when she saw his bare chest stained with blood.

“It’s just a scratch, it’s not very deep.”

Liriana squatted beside him and examined the wound carefully.

“You’ve been very lucky, it’s not as bad as it looks. But we need to give it some stitches, or it won’t close.” She touched his cheeks. “You’re very pale, you’ve lost more blood than you think.”

She withdrew and went for the satchel.

“Pretty chest, Hunter, strong and muscular, who would have thought…” said Albana with her head tilted to one side. “And look at those supple arms, a nice surprise for female eyes. Seeing how few men there are left for us…”

Ikai glared at her, not liking these biting comments.

“Let it be, Albana,” said Liriana as she knelt beside him with needle and thread in one hand and the ointment against infections in the other.

Albana smiled. “You’re right. At any rate, it seems the Hunter is prone to stumbling on wild beasts… look at that huge scar on his side… he survived thanks to Girlai, Father Moon. A waste of a man. He won’t last long.”

Ikai was so angry he tried to get up, but Liriana held him down where he was.

“Stay still, I have to cure you,” she said, and turned to the brunette. “Albana, go and make sure the area is safe!”

The girl smiled, her eyes shining with triumph. “All right, I’ll come back soon. I don’t want to leave you two alone for too long… a half-naked man in your arms, Liriana… you never know what might happen…”

The Captain glared at her. “Albana!” she growled.

The brunette laughed heartily. With the agility of a great cat she went into the forest and disappeared into the thick vegetation with scarcely a sound.

“And now I’ll sew you up,” Liriana said, and winked at him. That was the last he saw before he lost consciousness.

When he woke it was still midmorning. He looked around and saw that he was alone in the camp.

Damn, they left without me! They left me behind! He looked for them in alarm but could not see the two girls. *I’ll find them, they can’t be far ahead, and even if not, I know how to track. I’ll find them, oh yes I will!* he thought, and got slowly to his feet.

“Sleepy-head’s awake at last,” said a voice he recognized immediately.

Albana. He searched for her among the trees and bushes, but could not find her. That damn woman disappeared among the shadows with amazing ease. He finished getting to his feet. He was wearing his shirt. Underneath it he could feel a tight bandage over the wound, but it barely hurt, which puzzled him.

“Where are you? Come out.”

“The great tracker can’t find me?”

“Come out or I swear I’ll…!” Ikai grunted, and bit his tongue.

Albana’s laughter reached him on the wind from somewhere in the east.

That damn girl is good, Ikai thought as he tried to locate her with all his senses. *I can’t see her trail, even though she’s close. I know it because I can smell her scent, but I can’t see her among the leaves. She’s too good… if she’d only move a little, but she doesn’t…*

“Come out, you’ve had your fun,” Liriana said as she appeared between the trees a little further north.

Albana came out from behind a fallen tree. The two women came up to the camp while Ikai collected his weapons and finished dressing.

“You’d better sit down and eat something or you’ll faint,” Liriana said.

“Faint?”

“Yes, sleepyhead, you’ve been snoring for two whole days,” Albana told him.

“Two days? It can’t be! It only felt like a moment.”

“Well, it’s been two whole days,” Liriana said with a smile. “Eat, you need it.”

The three sat down around the camp fire and ate what Albana had caught. It seemed that besides moving like a cat, the brunette had a very good aim with the bow.

“Thank you, it’s very good,” Ikai said rather uncomfortably, “and thank you for not leaving me to my fate…”

“I gave you my word,” Liriana replied with shining eyes, “and I keep my word. You helped me get out of the Boundary and brought me to Albana. I’ll keep my part of the deal. Besides, Gedrel would never forgive me for leaving you. And I value his respect above everything else.”

“Anyway, I want to thank you.”

Ikai was impressed by Liriana’s display of honesty and loyalty. More and more he was coming to appreciate this young woman’s excellent qualities. She was not just a born leader, she was whole. He could see deeply-rooted values and pure ideals in her. Now he understood what Gedrel saw in her, even though she would most likely die because of them. An admirable woman indeed. Unlike Albana, who was disloyal, sinister and dangerous. He needed to be very careful with her or he might finish up with a knife in his back.

“What’s the plan?” he wanted to know.

“I guide and you follow,” Albana said. “It’s simple.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“To an amazing place, and a very dangerous one too. So if you want to stay alive you’ll have to do whatever I say, whether you like it or not.”

Ikai looked at Liriana with a frown, and she nodded.

“All right. When do we leave?”

“At dawn,” Albana said. And with that she disappeared into the forest once again.

For days they made their way through forests, jungles and unusual meadows with vegetation Ikai had never seen before. One evening, as they were camping beside a stream of crystal clear water, Albana went into the dense undergrowth to make sure there was no danger at hand. He took advantage of her absence to try and gain information from Liriana, with whom he now shared an easy companionship.

“Tell me, what do you really know about her?” he asked, with a nod towards the forest.

“About Albana? Not much, really. She’s very private when it comes to her past. I think she must have suffered a great deal. I’ve certainly read that in her eyes.”

“Is she with you? With Gedrel?”

“No. She’s a free spirit. She helps us, but she’s not with us. But I can assure you she hates the Regent and his Proxies as much as we do, or even more. And her hatred for the Gods and their Enforcers is greater than I’ve ever seen in anybody. She must have been through a terrible tragedy, although she never speaks of it.”

“And she helps you? She’s not trustworthy… I can assure you of that.”

“Our interests run in parallel. We help each other. She uses our organization and we use her… skills.”

“Skills… I wanted to talk to you about that. Did you see how she appeared the night of the fight with the tiger? She was wrapped in a black mist. It was something unnatural…”

Liriana shrugged. “She’s special, it’s true. I know, I feel it. I don’t understand how and I don’t care. There’s a lot in these worlds we move in that we don’t understand yet, and it may take us a long time before we do.”

“But how can she be here in the first place? Only the Hunters and the Enforcers of the Gods can cross the Boundary, and yet she knows this world as well as the one we’ve left behind. That can only be possible if she’s been coming and going regularly and exploring the world on this side. How can she do it?”

“When I asked her about that she told me not to worry, it only concerns her and her *arts* are nobody’s business. That’s enough for me.”

Ikai shook his head. “Well, it’s not enough for me. Think about it, Liriana, there’s something unnatural about her *arts*. They’re somehow not

human… Where have you ever seen anything as strange as that? Only in the things the Gods do. Only they have the Power, not even their Enforces have it. No human could have it. The Hunters know that very well, because we hunt all kinds of men. I've never seen anyone like her before…"

Liriana frowned. "I've seen the Eyes-of-the-Gods do things that would be impossible for men. You yourself said the Master Hunters use a Power which makes them infallible when they're hunting."

Ikai waved a finger. "That's not entirely correct. The Eyes use objects: strange discs they use to do unimaginable things, or use as weapons against men. And the Master Hunters have the Falcon Eye, which is a disc with a certain power of the Gods. The Masters can't even touch the arcane object, they have to protect their hand with a special gauntlet. They both use objects with the power of the Gods in them. I've thought about this a lot, and I'm sure that it's the objects that have the Power, not the people who use them."

"In that case," Liriana said, "Albana must have one of those objects and she's keeping it secret, but it's just a guess. And in any case it doesn't concern us."

He cupped his chin in his hand and tried to remember all the details of Albana's appearance in the night. "I don't know, she might have a disc, it's true," he said at last, "but in any case, I don't trust her in the least. I didn't trust her before, and now I trust her even less."

"I've no reason not to trust her. She's always been loyal to us, and a valuable agent. Her secrets are hers, just like her past. I can't force her to reveal them, and nor can you." There was a clear warning in her turquoise eyes.

He knew she was right, but something inside him rebelled against trusting the mysterious brunette: not only for her past betrayal, but for that sinister skill. He would have to watch her closely.

Suddenly Albana appeared at a run, leapt over a fallen log covered with mold and came to a halt in the middle of the camp. Ikai and Liriana stared at her in surprise.

"What…" Liriana began.

Albana put a finger on her lips, her eyes open wide in pure alarm.

Ikai read her face at once. Danger!

Liriana looked at her without understanding, and the brunette showed seven fingers. Then she pointed south. The Captain understood, nodded and began to get to her feet without making any noise.

Ikai looked in the direction Albana was pointing at and saw a curious beam of light cutting through the thick vegetation of the forest, almost reaching them. He recognized it the moment he saw it. *The Falcon Eye! Hunters!* He jumped to his feet and grabbed his bow.

Albana ran like lightning, leaping over underbrush and roots. Ikai followed her at once. A moment later Liriana was running behind them. The brunette moved like a panther, heading north at an amazing speed; Ikai found it hard to keep up with her. They ran as fast as they could, with the moss-lined forest passing in front of their eyes, under their feet, surrounding them in all directions. He glanced back and saw Liriana lagging behind, unable to keep up with the tremendous pace set by Albana. It was then that he realized the seriousness of the situation: they were being hunted, and the Hunters never failed. Nobody knew that fact better than he did himself. It was a matter of hours: no matter how fast they ran, they would be caught. First Liriana, and then himself or Albana. They might try to escape, but their strength would eventually fail and they would be caught. He knew it, because that was what these men trained to do every day of their lives.

For the first time he felt the horror, the despair of being on the other side, on the side of the prey. And he felt fear, deep fear which froze his soul, for he was going to be hunted like an animal and taken back to the Regent to serve as a public example. The fear began to turn to panic in his chest, but he controlled it. They had not hunted him yet, and while there was life there was hope.

Albana swerved abruptly to the left, so he nearly lost sight of her. He looked for Liriana behind him and saw her very far back, with her face red from the effort, panting heavily. She was not going to keep up much longer. He narrowed his eyes and looked carefully. He could make them out among the trees: five Hunters in a semicircle. Two more would be further behind. Their brown clothes did not blend in so well in that forest with its lining of intense green, from the ground to the tops of the trees.

He searched for Albana. From behind a tree she gestured at him to hurry up. At least she was not abandoning them… for now. Liriana reached him. She had the Hunters at her heels. Ikai let her pass and ran after her.

When the Hunters reached them he would be the first to face them and fall. It was the right thing to do.

They reached a deep moss-covered gully, and Albana rushed into it. Liriana went after her, and Ikai followed. The gully ended in an earthen wall with an opening dug into it. He guessed Albana's intention: to hide and let the Hunters pass by. But he was completely wrong; the brunette ran past it and kept running faster still. Liriana just managed to follow her, and he caught up with them on the slope that led out of the gully.

"Why…?" he was about to ask, panting, when Albana stopped and crouched suddenly. He and Liriana did the same at once, not understanding. A chilling howl filled the gully and rose to the heavens. As three of the Hunters went by a monstrous black wolf came out of the cavern. It was breathtakingly big, practically double the size of a wild wolf. Its fur was lank and black, and a golden gleam in its eyes made it look as if it were possessed. It launched itself at the three Hunters. Caught by surprise, they were unable to flee and were forced to confront it.

Ikai guessed it was an alpha female, probably defending her lair. There was a dreadful growl, and blood spattered the ground and the trees nearby, turning the green red. The beast tore one of the Hunters apart as it was struck by the swords and knives of the other two. In fury, the monster turned and bit off the head of the second Hunter. The third stabbed the body of the monster frantically with short sword and knife. With a rending howl the beast died and fell on top of the Hunter, crushing him with its weight. Ikai felt a pang of pity for the fallen men. Suddenly another howl filled the gully. It was the alpha male, much bigger than the female. A nightmarish beast which lunged at the still-living Hunter and bit off one arm.

Ikai stared at the scene in a state of shock. He nocked an arrow to shoot at the beast, but Albana's hand stopped him. The brunette pointed to the top of the gully. Two Hunters appeared from the east and two more from the west, armed with short bows. Instantly they launched their arrows against the colossal male. They reached it as it was biting off the head of the Hunter who lay under its dead mate. They released again and again, drawing horrible howls from the wounded animal. The male, enraged by its loss and pain, tried to climb the wall of the gully to reach the Hunters in the east, but slipped and rolled down to the bottom. The Hunters kept releasing arrows

until the beast died with a terrible howl and lay there still beside its mate, riddled with arrows.

Albana seized her chance and shot at one of the Hunters in the east. The arrow caught him in the shoulder, and he fell to one side. Then she hid behind a tree.

“Hide!” she urged Ikai and Liriana.

The briefest moment later, three arrows reached the trees where they were hiding. Ikai nocked an arrow. His calculating mind studied the situation. There were four of them left, one wounded. The Hunters had three archers and they themselves had two: Liriana did not carry a bow. Their chances had improved a lot. Albana’s move had been cunning. The brunette was a source of endless surprises.

Both groups exchanged arrows from their respective protected positions, without being able to find a target. Neither side made any move to advance. They all remained under cover

Suddenly Ikai’s Ring flashed. He looked at it on his left wrist in surprise. What was happening? A white gleam filled his mind.

Turn yourself in, Ikai. There doesn’t have to be any more bloodshed.

He recognized Master Hunter Sejof immediately. *Listen to me, I’m pleading with you. You know I don’t wish you any harm. The Regent has ordered your capture at all costs. And not only him: the Enforcers of the Gods are looking for you too. You’ve created the worst possible enemies for yourself. I’ve found you first, but there are three other parties of Hunters searching for you. You have no way of escape, they won’t let you get away. Turn yourself in and I promise you’ll stay alive, for the sake of all we’ve been through together, for the sake of the friendship we once shared: for the sake of all that I beg you, drop your weapons and turn yourself in.*

He breathed in deeply. The last thing he wanted was to face his Master, the father-figure who had filled the void the forced disappearance of his real father had left in his heart. And with him would be his fellow Hunters, his hunting brothers he had shared so much with and whom he loved like his own family. He would have to fight them too. He shook his head. He had no desire to fight his own people, anything but that.

Liriana saw him shaking his head, and there was worry in her eyes as she stared at him. But there was more than worry, there was… fear. He strained his neck and met Albana’s wild black eyes. There was no fear in

them, but they did not shine with the same intensity as before. Her face had lost its defiant confidence; she too was worried. If he turned himself in he would avoid fighting, but he would be sentencing himself to death, for the Regent and the Enforcers would kill him. And not only himself, he would doom Liriana and Albana with him. Even if he gave himself up, they would not. If they fought, either of them might die. And if they were captured, they would suffer the same ultimate fate. *The Hunters wouldn't allow anyone who'd crossed the Boundary to stay alive and talk. They wouldn't let them escape. They'd be captured or killed if they resisted. It's the law of the Gods, and they'd make sure it was followed.*

He sighed. To give himself up to save his own skin was to betray them, and no matter how much he might try to avoid fighting his own former family, he could not betray his two companions. *I can't. I won't.* The image of Kyra's face, smiling, came into his mind, and he knew with complete certainty that he could not back down.

Drop your weapons and come out, Ikai, for the good of everyone.

He filled his lungs and let out a deep sigh.

"I can't turn myself in, Master, I'm sorry! Withdraw and go back to the capital!"

Liriana and Albana looked at him in amazement.

You know I can't do that. You're one of mine, you're my responsibility. The Regent will kill my wife and my daughters if you don't come back with me. I can't. I'm sorry. I must bring you in.

Ikai accepted the inevitable: there would be bloodshed. "Brother Hunters!" he shouted toward the gully. "Go back in peace… or die!" He waited an instant. He risked a look. Two arrows struck the tree-trunk with a hollow sound; a piece of bark hit his cheek. He drew his head back at once. They could not stay there, exchanging arrows. Sejof would communicate with the other Master Hunters using the Falcon Eye, and other parties would come to hunt them too. He had to do something. *Think! What are the Hunters expecting you to do?*

Albana threw a pebble towards him to attract his attention. He looked at her, coming out of his thoughts

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

He could make out the moon, partially hidden behind clouds, behind her. Her dark clothes were beginning to blend into the darkness which was

falling on the dense forest. His eyes lingered briefly on the scene. Soon nothing would be visible. They could slip away into the night and flee.

“We wait,” he said.

Darkness took over the forest. Time went by very slowly until the wait was over. The Hunters began to move forward at last: two from the east and two from the west, under cover of the dark, flanking the position of the three fugitives. They came with bows ready, slowly, with extreme caution, with barely a noise, like night-time predators. Crouching, they advanced until they were in a position to dodge the trees which hid their prey. A whistle was heard to the east. A moment later, in a pincer movement, the two Hunters coming from the west attacked the position. At once the two from the east followed.

They found the position deserted. Not a trace of their prey.

“They’ve fled,” Sejof guessed. As Ikai knew well, all the prey they chased always fled the Hunters. The Hunters turned to face north, searching for the trail of the three fugitives. But this prey was not the normal kind.

From the top of the beech behind the four Hunters, Ikai and Albana let fly their arrows. Two were hit. Liriana jumped on the other three, and they rolled on the ground. Ikai and Albana jumped on the two men they had hit as they were trying to stand. Ikai, on his knees, brought out his sword. The wounded Hunter turned on the ground; it was Ismes. Ikai put his knee on his friend’s chest and his sword found his throat. Ismes stared at him with anxious eyes and raised a bloodied hand. The arrow was embedded in his shoulder. Ikai was paralyzed by doubt. He was unable to finish him. He heard a dying gurgle to his left and saw Albana slitting the throat of her opponent as she squeezed his body like a snake. Liriana gave a grunt, and he saw she was in trouble; she was fending off Master Sejof. A gleam on the ground caught Ikai’s eye, and he saw that Ismes had taken out a knife.

“No, my friend,” Ikai said, and hit him hard with the pommel of his sword three times, sharply, one blow after the other. With his nose broken and covered in blood, Ismes was out of the fight.

Liriana blocked a thrust to her heart from Sejof and deflected the Master’s knife thrust with her dagger, but was forced to step back once again. Liriana’s technique with the sword was magnificent, but Sejof was a true master.

The other Hunter she had thrown down recovered and came at her. Ikai recognized his friend and hastened to stop him. “Yestas, no!” he shouted. Yestas’ sword stabbed Liriana in the shoulder. The Captain took a step back with a grunt of pain, tripped over a root and fell on her back. She lost her sword. Albana appeared like lightning and charged against Sejof, knocking the Master down. Yestas raised his sword to finish Liriana.

“No!” Ikai shouted.

The sword came down for the final stroke. Ikai arrived and parried the blow. Yestas glared at him, eyes glittering with battle-frenzy.

“Yestas, stop, for heaven’s sake!” Ikai begged.

“We’re what we are,” he replied, and thrust a flashing stroke at his chest. Ikai deflected the sword, but lost his balance. Yestas attacked again, and Ikai had to roll to one side to avoid the blow. Liriana tried to stand up, and Yestas saw her. The Hunter swerved and went to kill her. Ikai’s dagger cut through the air with a lethal whistle. It caught Yestas in the back and sank in to the hilt. Yestas arced, lowered his sword and slumped. Liriana stepped aside and picked up her sword.

Ikai was in a state of shock. He had killed Yestas, his friend, his brother. The horror of the tragedy hit him so hard he was stunned, his mind left blank. He could not focus, he could not hear. Time stopped, and he felt he was trapped in a nightmare. *I’ve killed Yestas! I’ve killed him!* A terrible pain was boring a hole in his chest.

“Ikai!” Liriana shouted.

The young woman’s voice brought him back to reality. She was fending off Sejof, who was fighting the two women with extraordinary skill. Albana’s quick daggers could not manage to wound him, and Liriana could barely block the Master’s attacks.

Ikai went to Yestas and knelt beside him. “I’m so sorry, my friend. Forgive me.” He took the dagger from his back and turned to Sejof.

“Master,” he said in greeting.

Sejof took a step back and stood *en garde*. Liriana was panting with exhaustion, and Albana’s eyes glared with fury at her inability to cut the Master.

“Hunter,” the master said with a bow.

Ikai stepped forward and showed him his weapons. The Master saluted the same way.

“Ikai, no,” Liriana said.

“Don’t interfere, this is between my Master and me.”

The two Hunters circled each other, measuring distances and reaction times, and the lethal dance began. Sword and knife met in the night in a choreographed dance of death. The two men exchanged thrusts, strokes, backstrokes and lethal knife-strokes at a devilish speed, without either being able to cut his opponent. Ikai tried a feint in order to thrust a stroke at Sejof’s thigh with his knife, but the other saw it and in a counterattack cut Ikai in the forearm. Ikai took a step back, attacked, and at that instant two black daggers flew against Sejof. In a flashing movement he deflected Ikai’s sword with his own and the first dagger with his knife, but he could not block the second. It caught him in the shoulder, two finger-breadths from his neck.

Ikai turned his head towards Albana. “I told you not to interfere!”

“You can die if you want to,” Albana said condescendingly. “But I don’t have to watch.”

Sejof took a step back. His weapons dropped from his hands, and he fell to his knees.

“Finish him off,” Albana said.

“No! Let him be!”

“Ikai, he’s a Master Hunter,” Liriana said. “If we leave him alive…”

“I know, do you think I don’t?” Ikai said full of conflicting feelings. He eyed his Master, the man who had been like a second father: defeated, his life in his hands. He went over to him.

“Have you called them?”

Sejof shook his head. “I wanted to capture you myself… to stop them from killing you and presenting your head…”

“Don’t believe anything he says, he just wants to save his neck,” Albana said.

“You know me well, Ikai, you know I don’t lie.”

“How much of a lead do we have?”

“You… have four days, five at the most: Kosler’s group will have found your trail by now.”

Ikai nodded. “I’m sorry it had to come to this, Master.”

“So am I,” Sejof said with his head bent.

“Liriana, the Falcon Eye,” Ikai said, gesturing toward it.

The Captain went over to Sejof, and the Master gave her the disc and the strange glove. Liriana looked at the object with interest. Ikai held out his hand and Liriana gave him both objects. He put them away carefully.

“Our paths separate here, Master,” Ikai said with cold calm. “If we meet again, I’ll kill you.”

Albana’s eyes gleamed when she heard this.

Sejof nodded heavily and fell to one side.

“We leave now,” Ikai said.

“The sooner the better,” Liriana agreed.

Ikai whispered in Albana’s ear: “How far?”

The brunette stared at him fixedly. “Six days at a good pace. If he’s telling the truth, they’ll catch up with us.”

“He’s telling the truth.”

“Then let’s hurry.”

A few moments later the three fugitives went into the jungle without looking back.

20

Yosane was shaking. She had never been so afraid in her whole life. She looked up from the floor of ruby marble at the two giant warrior effigies whose shadows covered part of the enormous courtyard. The stone faces represented horror, the eyes madness, and from their mouths scorching lava fell into a lake of magma. Between the two statues rose the back of an immense palace-fortress, which extended over a hill to the north. The bleeding granite walls rose magnificently, the regal towers which culminated in fiery domes lit up the streets and palaces nearby, like scarlet beacons of the spirit. The atmosphere was heavy, and a scorching heat enveloped her. It smelt of burning, but a sinister kind: not burning stubble but sulfur.

She searched for some courage within herself, fearing she would not find any. She thought about Kyra, and a trace of courage came back into her heart. She swallowed hard. They had been separated, and this produced a corrosive anxiety in her chest which she could not shake off. She had no idea what might have happened to Kyra or Idana, or the others. She wished with all her heart that they might still be alive. She sighed. At least she was not alone. She took Gersa's hand in hers and stroked it. They had been sent to the palace-fortress in the Second Ring that same morning.

They were being kept in the southern part of the great courtyard, the one furthest from the back doors of the palace, locked up inside a sphere-cell. They were being watched by six huge Guards in bright red and orange. Yosane's eyes were caught by the great shield painted red, with its emblem in bright orange. It showed a volcano in eruption. She studied the nearest guard carefully. She was intrigued by these beings. What were they? Gods they were not, she could tell the difference clearly now. The Gods were slender and golden, and those guards, though they were tall, were not at all slender. Instead they were massive hulks. Also, though she could not see their faces under the elaborate helmets with the grim half-moons over their eyes, their skin was a toasted-ochre shade, not at all golden. And the thick black veins which ran across their bodies left no doubt.

What are you? Could you be men, like us? No, I don't think so… and if you once were, what happened? Then she thought of the Executors and the Eyes-of-the-Gods. Yes, those guards and the others who carried whips must be some kind of creation of the Gods. Servants created with one purpose only: to serve them faithfully. Yosane tried to think it through, as she liked to do with things she did not understand.

But how do they reproduce? She wondered about this, and found it fascinating. She was overcome by a tremendous longing for knowledge about this strange, divine society. But a moment later she realized her own precarious and dangerous situation, and came back to reality.

What do they want from the two of us? Why do they keep us in here? she asked herself, anxiety growing in her breast. They were just two more poor slaves, so why such vigilance? Where could they go? Throughout the courtyard were innumerable slave girls who had been working there for hours, preparing long tables and padded benches covered in rich materials, protected from the sun by enormous canopies. They were setting out all kinds of delicacies: from exotic fruits to unknown culinary specialties whose irresistible smell reached her. Her stomach rumbled like a lion.

"Mine's complaining too," Gersa said. She rubbed her stomach. "What a lot of food! I've never seen so much in one place before, even when I was dreaming. Who's it for?"

"I've no idea, but I can count more than a hundred cushions…"

Another large group of slaves was energetically cleaning the central part of the yard, and in the highest part numerous servants bustled to and for putting in place twenty or so large thrones, elaborately engraved, which would preside over the courtyard.

There are slaves everywhere. So why are they watching us in particular? Yosane did not understand, and it worried her, as did what she had found out about the Eternal City. While they were being taken to the palace, she had witnessed scenes she would never forget, for they had left their mark on her soul. All along the way hundreds of slaves in brown tunics and red headscarves worked incessantly on monumental works of stone and fire. The Enforcers whipped them mercilessly, their lashes echoing at every moment, creating a melody of suffering and death which was carried on a burning breeze. The monumental buildings which the

slaves were putting up for their masters, the Gods, surpassed the dreams of the most eccentric builders.

If my father could see all this magnificent madness…

She could not help thinking about her beloved father, a builder by profession; he would be ecstatic at the sight of all that grand architecture… and the madness of those designs and buildings! The Gods had erected giant statues of warriors, gardens with fountains of lava and fire, palaces which seemed to burn in flames yet were not consumed, entire rivers of magma. A madness he would have marveled at. But luckily he was safe in the capital, and she thanked the heavens for that.

Suddenly there came a loud explosion of fire, and she started. Gersa hugged her tight and they comforted each other's fear. Yosane tried to find where the explosion had come from. The search led to two huge wells in the center of the yard. From them came another explosion of fire which rose to the sky. Yosane covered her ears. A few moments later there came a rain of ashes and soot.

"What a horrible place!" Gersa whispered in horror.

"I know, but we must be strong," said Yosane, trying not to catch her companion's fear.

Gersa burst into tears. "I can't, I can't!"

Yosane thought about what Kyra would say to her to soothe her. "We must survive," she said, "Think about surviving."

"Survive? Here? Do you really want to survive here?" Gersa said between sobs.

Yosane thought about it. It would be easier to let herself be carried away by fear and opt for a quick death. The terror would come to an end… Gersa's weeping made her think twice. *No! Never!* She had to put ideas like that out of her mind. She would go on. *Survive and escape*, that was what Kyra always said, and that was what she would do. Gently she put her hands on Gersa's cheeks and looked into her eyes.

"We'll survive and we'll escape."

Gersa looked back at her and shook her head.

"We'll never get out of here alive. The only things in store for us in this nightmarish place are suffering and death."

Suddenly all the slaves dropped to the floor and stayed there with their heads pressed against the hard surface and their arms stretched forward. The guards tensed and bent their heads until they were doubled up in a deep bow. Yosane caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and understood the reason: the Golden God in red, the one who had been at the strange ceremony where they had been separated, was coming out of the palace. Yosane watched him approach. He walked haughtily: raised chin, defiant look in his eyes, the movements and poise of someone who knew himself to be lord and master of everything around him. He wore a rich red tunic engraved in golden and a scaled cuirass in rich golden-orange which shone brightly in the early evening sun.

At the mere sight of his ruby eyes, Yosane shivered.

Behind the God walked a dozen more golden divinities. She could not get used to the golden slenderness of the Gods, which seemed to her both beautiful and unnatural. They came in pairs, God and Goddess, arms linked. She could not take her eyes off the Goddesses: they were so beautiful, their features as delicate as the breath of a summer breeze. The gold of their skin was much softer than that of the Gods, which made them look more ‘human’. All wore their hair very long and straight, most the color of honey, some even that of wheat in summer.

A dozen guards in a line escorted their masters on both sides. The God leading the group stopped. At once everybody else stopped as well. He looked up at the sky for a moment and frowned. He lifted a golden arm and snapped his fingers. Immediately twenty slave girls carrying large parasols came out running from a side building and placed themselves on both sides of the Gods to protect them from the sun. When the Gods arrived at the thrones they sat, reigning over the courtyard. The God who presided over the scene glanced in the direction of Yosane and Gersa. Yosane saw the cruel red eyes fixed on her. She felt so scared that she shrank inside the sphere-cell as if she were a baby alone in the middle of the night.

The God waved his arm, and the great doors which gave access to the yard opened.

Yosane’s heart sank to the floor. “By all… the seas…”

From the door in the wall more Gods in pairs began to walk in, elegantly and ostentatiously dressed, flaunting their slenderness and exotic beauty. They stopped briefly to salute the thrones and took seats on the dais

prepared for them. Yosane watched them in astonishment. More than a hundred of them came in. One hundred Golden Gods!

“Yosane…” said Gersa unsteadily, pointing towards the west.

Through the western door another fifty Gods were coming in, but these were enormous, armed with swords, shields and spears. Instead of colorful tunics they wore full combat armor in red, with capes hanging from their shoulders. They looked like blood-hosts sent to collect souls.

Yosane was speechless. She even forgot to breathe… and hugged her knees tightly.

The God presiding over the scene raised his hand, and three young servant girls ran to him. One carried a tray of grapes, the second a tray of dates and the third a decanter of wine. When she was about to pour the wine, she tripped. A drop flew from the decanter and fell on the God’s hand.

Eyes staring wide with rage, the God stood up. When he did so, the three servants rolled on the ground, hit by the wave of power. The God murmured something and stretched his arm to one side, with his hand open, towards a great brazier burning at one end. He drew back his arm, and as he did so the fire flew to his hand. The flames burnt in his palm as if they were his toys. He stared at the slaves on the floor and his eyes lit up. A macabre smile spread across his face. With a deliberate movement he threw the flames at the slave girls. The three of them began to burn, screaming desperately, in terrible agony. They died in a matter of moments, consumed by fire.

In utter horror Yosane shut her eyes and hugged Gersa. She could not believe the cruelty she had just seen. She knew perfectly well that the Gods were capricious and were merciless with their slaves, but this was inhuman, an act which was both barbaric and senseless. She understood in that moment that for the Golden they were no more than lesser beings, worthless, totally expendable, units of work or entertainment who could be discarded at any moment at the snap of a finger. The horror of it all kept her clinging to her companion, eyes closed, with no desire to return to the dreadful reality she was in.

When she finally opened her eyes there was no further trace of the incident, as if it had never happened. *How sad… how horrible…* The cruel God appeared to be chatting with the others. But no rumor of conversation,

voice or word could be heard. Now she came to think about it, there was no sound at all in the yard or the thrones or the dais. *Odd… why isn't there any sound or any words?* She put her head nearer the bars and tried to hear something of the conversation which must be taking place. Her curiosity overcame her fears.

Suddenly a shadow completely obscured the bars. She tried to see what had hidden the sun when she felt a hard mental blow. Something had entered her head. She blinked hard, stunned.

You won't hear what they're talking about, slave, because they aren't voicing it, a deep voice said, not without a touch of gentleness.

Yosane drew back and held her head in her hands.

Don't be afraid. Your life doesn't interest me, it's insignificant.

Fearfully, she dared to peek outside. In front of her she saw the huge God-Warrior she had seen at the strange ceremony, when they had been separated. His bulk obscured the sun. He wore a tunic of intense shades of red decorated with vibrant orange. The armor was a deep red, as if soaked in blood. It was made of strong pieces of metal. The cuirass with its shoulder plates bore the same emblem embroidered on the chest that the guards wore. The gauntlets and grieves looked solid and heavy, and a crimson cape hung from his enormous shoulders. Yosane stared at him, mouth agape.

The giant God-Warrior smiled. It was a kind smile, considering how imposing he was.

Do you know who he is, slave? he said in her mind, looking towards the thrones.

She shook her head, half-dead with fear.

He is Lord Asu, Heir Prince of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring. Where you are. This is his kingdom, and everything here belongs to him. Alive or dead.

She managed to reason at last. How could this be? He was talking to her without moving his lips! But that was impossible! He was communicating from mind to mind. Sending his thoughts directly into her head. Amazing! Wonderful!

He is the most powerful Lord of the Five Houses.

Not knowing what to do, Yosane nodded nervously several times.

The God-Warrior stared at her intensely for a moment. *If you do not wish to suffer, I advise you always to remain out of reach of his anger. Your lives are already short enough, slave. Do not fill them with suffering, for his wrath is disproportionate, and he knows no pity.*

Yosane looked at him gratefully.

The God turned to leave.

“And you… are…?” Yosane asked him aloud.

The great warrior looked back at her slowly. He raised a thick eyebrow.

I am Iradu. Lord Asu’s Champion. Remember what I have told you. It will serve you well.

Iradu beckoned, and two young slaves came up to him. They were around twenty years old, tall and handsome. Their skin was very dark, which awoke all kinds of conjectures in Yosane’s mind. Those slaves were not of her race, nor her land.

We’re not the only ones… there are other races… other peoples. They’ve lied to us… for a thousand years. But why? What could be the reason? She shook her head and put her hand to her chest, her heart beating like a racing horse. *How many more things are they hiding from us? How many lies have they taught us in our small world?*

The two young men were dressed in brown, like all the slaves, but their tunics were of rich silk, not thick cloth. They were clean and perfumed, even the red headscarves they wore, which came down to their shoulders, were exquisitely made. They did not look like the other slaves… One of them carried a silver spear engraved in gold, the other a robust gauntlet, so beautiful it left her speechless. From the size of the gauntlet and the spear, she guessed they belonged to Iradu.

The God looked at the spear, then shook his head. He turned, unsheathed two short swords and went to the center of the yard with heavy strides, his hair in a long braid dangling at his back. He radiated tremendous strength, with his cape seeming to burn in flames as he moved. He was the living image of a war-god. Yosane felt sorry for whoever might confront this being.

Iradu stood in the center between the two wells of fire and saluted the other Gods with brief nods. There was a prolonged silence, which hung over the yard like heavy fog.

“What’s the matter, what do you think they’re doing?” Gersa asked. There were tears in her eyes.

“I think they must be talking to the God-Warrior, but they do it with their minds, so we can’t hear them.”

“Their minds? Have you gone crazy?”

Yosane explained to her what had just happened. While she was doing this eight guards walked into the courtyard armed with their massive shields and short spears and gathered around Iradu. They saluted him with a respectful nod, and the God-Warrior returned the salute. The guards took up their positions, ready to attack.

“Are they going to fight?” Yosane wondered out loud.

“Our lord Iradu will fight in the barbarian style with the Custodians, to entertain Lord Asu’s guests,” said the servant who was holding the God-Warrior’s spear.

Yosane turned to the young man and looked at him through the bars.

“Custodians?”

“The Custodians are the guardians of the Gods. Those imposing warriors you see. It appears you’re not familiar with the ranks of the Enforcers of the Gods. You surely know the Eyes-of-the-Gods and Executors. Then there are the Oppressors, who are the ones who carry the whips and are in charge of the slaves, and the Custodians, who protect the Gods.”

Yosane’s eyes grew wider. “Barbarian style?”

“They’ll fight with conventional weapons, without using the Power of the Gods.”

Yosane’s eyes opened wider still. At the same time her curiosity got the better of her.

“Who… who are you? How do you know this?”

“My name is Sulab, and this is Mulsa. We’re slaves, like you. But we had the good fortune to be chosen as Lord Iradu’s pages.”

Lord Asu stood up, took a step forward and dropped a handkerchief on the floor with a melodramatic flourish, smiling sardonically as he did so.

At once the Custodians attacked. The fastest one attacked Iradu and tried to thrust a spear into him. The God deflected it with one of his swords and received the attack with a terrible kick, which sent the huge Custodian

flying backwards like a straw dummy. As he carried through the same move, he threw the other on to the ground. A spear headed straight for Iradu's face. The God, in complete control, shifted his head slightly so that the spear brushed his cheek without leaving a scratch. The attacker took the God's sword in the neck, and blood soaked the silver blade.

Yosane cried out in horror. "It's not an exhibition, it's a real fight to the death!"

"Of course," Sulab said. "A God never draws his weapon without shedding blood."

But that was impossible. "Why would a God risk fighting his servants?"

"It's a demonstration of courage and mastery with weapons in combat. Our Lord is the greatest of the divine warriors. He's never been defeated," the slave said admiringly.

"But that's crazy!"

Iradu leapt to one side, blocked two spears with his swords, went down on one knee, then with two swift strokes sliced off the legs of two of his attackers, dodging their shields from below. A Custodian leapt on to him, shield first, intending to topple the God. Iradu dug in his feet, flexed his knees, moved his shoulder forward and put all his weight into it. The Custodian crashed into the God, and it was as if he had hit a granite wall. The Custodian fell to the ground senseless. Iradu decapitated him with a lightning stroke.

When she saw the head roll on the floor Yosane covered her mouth so as not to cry out. It was Gersa who screamed on her behalf.

Four Custodians were still standing. Iradu signaled with his sword for them to come at him. The four attacked at once, their spears searching for chest and back. But Iradu leapt as if his huge body were weightless and passed over the heads of two of the attackers, then rolled on the floor and got back to his feet behind them.

The Custodians swerved, but Iradu, with another leap, lunged at them. He disarmed the first with such a swift maneuver that the Custodian's eye could not even catch it. He tried to take cover behind his shield, but the God hit the metal edge with both swords at once, with such force that it flew off the other's arm. Even disarmed, the Custodian did not cower, and lunged at

Iradu. Steel flew in a deadly arc, shining in the sun, and slit the throat of the daring attacker.

The spear of the second Custodian aimed straight at Iradu's face. Two inches away from his eye the God deflected the trajectory with his own sword. He launched a devastating kick at the shield, and the Custodian flew backwards. The guard tried to stop the momentum of the brutal blow, but was unable to. He fell into one of the wells just at the moment when fire burst out again.

Yosane shut her eyes tightly in absolute horror. When she opened them she saw Lord Asu on his feet, laughing and gesticulating. The other Gods applauded: muffled applause, for they clapped their hands on their thighs instead of against each other.

The last two Custodians attacked. Iradu stretched his shoulders and thrust out his swords to the sides, leaving his wide torso uncovered. The spears sought to run him through. Iradu waited until the last instant, then with a downwards spinning motion of both arms deflected the spears outwards. He took a lightning step forward and charged at the two Custodians like a raging bull. He overwhelmed them. They were thrown to either side and hit the floor hard. Iradu took another leap and pierced the first one, nailing him to the ground. He swerved and saw the other Custodian trying to get up. With colossal force, he threw his sword. It caught the guard in the chest, piercing armor, flesh and bone. He collapsed to one side, dead.

The courtyard broke into applause, and the Gods stood up, applauding in that odd way. Iradu saluted the audience, respectfully, and then his master Lord Asu. The God-Prince nodded in acknowledgement, and there was a triumphant smile on his face. The champion withdrew amid applause. Yosane, her eyes wide, was biting her lip hard. She was horrified by what she had just witnessed.

The God-Warrior went over to his pages, and one of them carefully wiped the blood from his armor. With a gesture, Iradu requested his gauntlet. He took off the metal mitten which protected his left arm and put on the curious piece of armor, which covered his hand and forearm as far as the elbow. It appeared to be metal, made up of sheets and solid rectangular pieces. It was very sturdy, and looked heavy. The God-Warrior took the

silver spear, shook his head to put his long queue back in place, then turned once more to the center of the yard. All the Gods stood up.

Yosane watched, hypnotized, and glanced aside at Gersa, who said not a word.

Iradu raised his arms and turned towards the west, where the fifty God-Warriors watched him.

“What’s going on? What’s he doing?” Yosane asked.

“Our Lord is challenging the best warriors of Lord Asu, before the entire Royal House and the most influential nobles,” the page said, looking first at the thrones and then at the great dais.

Yosane now understood who all those other Gods were.

“Challenging?” she asked.

“To a Duel of Power, to take his place as Champion of the House of Aureb. Last year nobody dared dispute his position. They all fear our Lord.”

Looking at the warriors, Yosane saw they were all enormous and so menacing in appearance that her soul shrank at the mere sight of them. Nobody moved. They were all looking at Iradu with great respect.

“Nobody’s coming out,” Yosane said, relieved at not having to witness any more bloodshed.

Once again Iradu shook his spear and gauntlet.

And from among the warriors, one stepped forward.

Yosane stared at him and was left speechless. He was taller than Iradu, and equally strong. Like all the rest, his head was clean-shaven with a long queue hanging down his back. He was armed with silver spear and gauntlet. With an expression of determination, he came forward until he was standing in front of Iradu. The Gods broke into applause.

“My Lord has been challenged. There will be combat,” the page said. He sounded worried.

“Do you know him?”

“It’s Pesako. He’s said to be an unequaled fighter. He’s never been defeated in a Duel of Power. He takes part in the annual Games between the Five Houses. He’s the current champion. But the House Champions don’t take part in the Games, and he’s never measured himself against our lord.”

Yosane was taking in all this information, unable to take her eyes off what was going on in the center of the yard. The two God-Warriors were

eyeing each other, while a great tension grew in the atmosphere. Lord Asu waved his hand, and both warriors bowed deeply. They moved several steps away from each other and stood in position. The nobles on the dais sat down, and Lord Asu unsheathed a ceremonial sword and raised it above his head. Silence reigned in the courtyard once more. The sword came down.

Pesako shook his right arm and the silver spear caught fire. He took a step forward, made as if to hurl the spear, and a fiery javelin shot out from it at tremendous speed. Iradu thrust out his forearm, and from out of the gauntlet came an enormous round shield which now covered almost all his body. The shield began to burn an instant before it received the impact of the javelin. Iradu protected himself behind the shield and set fire to his spear. Pesako in turn activated his fiery shield and raised his spear above his head.

Yosane’s eyelashes stuck to her eyelids. She looked down at her slave Ring on her left arm, and wished she had that fantastic gauntlet.

Pesako charged against Iradu with inhuman speed, sliding his feet over a blanket of lava which formed at each step, as if he were skating on ice, except that this was magma. Yosane stared at him in disbelief. Iradu could not dodge the charge and took it full on his shield. He was thrown backwards from the impact and hit the floor ten paces away, hard. Pesako seized his advantage, took a prodigious leap and sent a trident of fire from his spear against Iradu. The champion rolled over to one side an instant before it reached him. He got to his feet, and as his rival touched the ground he swept his shield from one side to the other, sending an arc of fire against him. Pesako leapt over it and came to stand in front of Iradu.

The two warriors exchanged blows of fire, with their flaming spears trying to penetrate the fiery shields. The blows and backstrokes were so rapid that only the resultant flames could be seen when weapons and defenses made contact. The two Gods seemed to be fighting amid a sea of fire. Pesako took one step back, withdrew his spear and shield, threw his head back, and with a beastly roar sent a cone of sustained fire against his opponent, as if it were the burning breath of some creature of fire. Iradu protected himself behind his shield, but Pesako came forward, keeping up the breath of fire against his rival.

Yosane put her hands to her cheeks. Iradu was in trouble. The champion waved his spear and raised a wall of fire in front of him. Pesako

had to stop his advance to avoid crashing into it. Yosane noticed that an incandescent surface was forming under Iradu's fee, it was a glyph. Instantly it exploded with a deafening noise. The champion was boosted up into the sky by the explosion, which left a wake of sparks behind it.

Yosane saw him fly, and forgot to breathe. From the heights, Iradu launched a fiery missile against Pesako, who intercepted it with one of his own. Both missiles burst into flames in midair without reaching their targets. Pesako in turn propelled himself into the sky with another fiery explosion, which made Yosane cover her ears. But Iradu was expecting him; he sent a ball of fire which rolled through the air until it reached him. Pesako protected himself with his shield, but the explosion of flames when the fireball made contact was so strong that it unbalanced him, sending him off to one side.

Pesako tried to correct his position in mid-flight. Iradu saw it and as he fell, threw another tremendous fiery ball at him. Unbalanced and in midair, Pesako could only defend himself by moving his shield into place. The terrible impact of the explosion sent him toppling straight towards the ground. As he fell, the skillful warrior turned his body and sent a missile against the ground in order to propel himself in the opposite direction and avoid the impact. The missile reached the ground and Pesako shot back into the sky, avoiding disaster.

But a ball of fire reached him full in the chest at the precise moment he managed to regain a vertical position. Iradu fell straight down and caught up with him. Pesako was thrown off amid a sea of flames and crashed into the ground with a terrible impact.

Yosane closed her eyes and choked back a scream. Iradu sent a couple of fiery missiles against the floor under his feet before crashing and managed to break his fall. Ten feet from the ground he dropped, then rolled the moment he hit the floor. He straightened up and moved at inhuman speed towards his opponent, sliding across fire.

Lord Asu was smiling broadly. Pesako lay unconscious on the ground in flames. Iradu went to him and gestured urgently. Four warriors came running with great amphorae full of water, which they emptied on the fallen warrior.

The applause filled the yard. Not a single God, warrior or noble held back.

They took away the loser, who although badly wounded, seemed to have avoided death.

“Our lord is as magnificent a warrior as he is merciful,” Sulab said. “He has let his rival live.”

Yosane looked at him, still in a state of shock, unable to assimilate all she had just witnessed.

“If that’s what they do to their own people… what’ll they do to us?” stammered Gersa.

Yosane did her best to calm her. “Nothing will happen to us, don’t worry.” She turned to Sulab. “Right?”

The page shrugged. “You’re not beautiful enough for the harems of the nobles, not even for their personal service. They haven’t sent you to forced labor, which is where you should be, and you’re prisoners of the heir to the House of Aureb. I don’t know what’s in store for you, but I can assure you of one thing: if Lord Asu has shown an interest in you, and it seems he has, since he has you locked up here, it means nothing good. I’m sorry.” The page turned and went to meet his lord.

Yosane hugged Gersa. “Don’t take any notice of him, I’m sure nothing will happen to us,” she lied with all the conviction she could muster. She was thinking of Lord Asu’s cruel, fiery eyes.

21

They left the dense forest in haste, and tall grassland opened before their eyes. The sunset welcomed them, bathing them in a soft crimson light. Albana led the way, with Liriana following a few steps behind and Ikai bringing up the rear. The three were keeping up a good pace. Unfortunately the other group of Hunters had already found their trail, and they had to escape if they wanted to stay alive. Ikai took a look back over his shoulder, afraid of seeing one of their pursuers, but saw only furtive shadows inside the great forest.

Suddenly Albana stopped in the middle of the grassland. Ikai put his hand to his sword and followed her example, scanning the area. The mysterious girl pointed ahead without a word. Liriana moved forward and Ikai followed; in front of them was only an orange sky fading into the distant horizon. They moved on again and something extraordinary happened: in the distance the ground ahead was no longer green but had turned completely blue. Liriana and Ikai went forward slowly, staring at each other in puzzlement, until the ground disappeared to become an infinite expanse of blue.

The sea.

Ikai was in a state of shock as he stared at the ocean from the top of the cliff, overcome with emotion. He spread his arms wide and let the cool breeze of the sea caress his face. He breathed in deeply to fill his lungs. It smelt of the sea, of salt water… *of sea!* He stared in disbelief, unable to take in the full greatness and splendor of the ocean. His heart wanted to leap out of his chest and merge with that infinite blue. He closed his eyes and gave his emotions full rein. They had come to Oxatsi, Mother Sea, she whom the Gods had denied to her children the Senoca.

The roaring of the waves breaking incessantly against the cliffs brought him back to reality. He felt Liriana’s hand take his own, and turned aside to look at her. There were tears in the girl’s eyes as she gazed at the ocean, lost in the grandeur of the eternal mother.

“Can you believe it, Ikai? It’s the sea… the sea… as beautiful as in the legends… even more so.”

He saw that tears were running down her tanned cheeks. He was suddenly very aware of her hand on his.

“I never thought I’d get to see it,” he said, shaking his head.

“It’s so beautiful!”

“So it is. It makes you feel humble and insignificant before its immensity.”

“It takes my breath away. We’re in the presence of Oxatsi after a thousand years… I can’t believe it.” She squeezed his hand hard.

Ikai turned to her, and their eyes met. They remained silent, gazing at each other, unable to look away, with emotions that were too intense, impossible to control. A damp salty breeze blew strongly under the fading sun, and red reflections lit them up. For an instant he felt he was in a dream which he had no desire to wake up from. Liriana smiled at him and all his troubles vanished, swept away by that simple gesture of beauty and life.

“I guessed you’d like to see it,” Albana said from a few steps behind them.

The two looked at Albana, then once again at the immensity of the sea. They did not let go of one another’s hands.

Albana turned back to the forest. “Maybe one day I can show you some of the beaches and coves on this coast. They’re so beautiful they’ll leave you speechless. But now we have to move on. We’re very near, and here we’re an easy target. Follow me.”

A few hours later the three fugitives looked down from a high hill at the enormous port in the distant bay. They crouched, hidden behind a fallen oak. The forest in the distance murmured restlessly behind them.

“There it is,” Albana said. She nodded in the direction of the great ships docked in the inlet.

Ikai half-closed his eyes as he scanned the activity. “What is that place?” he asked.

“It’s the end of the road. What we came to find,” Albana replied with her usual secrecy.

Liriana craned forward. “I can count more than twenty ships. They’re very big. Most of them seem cargo ships, but from here it’s difficult to be sure.”

“Look at the black monolith in the fourth building,” Ikai said. “That’s certainly the work of the Gods. What would those buildings be for? They’re huge…”

“The biggest and squarest is where they store all kinds of materials and goods they bring from different places before transporting them in those big ships you can see. It’s some kind of temporary storage.”

“Do you know where those ships come from?” Liriana asked.

“No, but the process goes on non-stop, from both east and west. I tried to follow one of them, but I found it was impossible. What I can tell you is that we’re not the only people enslaved by the Gods. Those ships don’t come from our lands.”

“Gedrel’s suspected that for some time,” Liriana said.

“He’s right.”

Ikai was listening closely. This information was of profound importance to him, even though he found it hard to believe. Nobody had ever said anything about other peoples. The High Priests claimed the exact opposite. It seemed to him very unlikely, another story to create hope in the hearts of men and nothing more than that. But seeing those ships and the port, he wanted to know more.

“Please go on,” he begged. For the first time he began to see a real chance of reaching Kyra.

“The next one,” Albana said, pointing to the second building, “is full of cages, many of them quite big ones.”

“Cages?” Liriana asked in surprise.

“Yes. The Gods like wild, dangerous animals. Don’t ask me why, I don’t know. They hunt them and shut them up in the cages, then they’re sent to the Eternal City. Two months ago I came on a hunting party of the Enforcers of the Gods. They didn’t see me. They’d caught a panther and two lionesses. Who knows what macabre end the Gods have in store for those beasts?”

Liriana's face shadowed, and she nodded.

"In the next building, the third one, the one shaped like a square, the servants prepare the slaves before loading them on board for the Eternal City. They strip them naked, then under the threat of the whip they clean them thoroughly, as if they were flea-ridden dogs. Then they're given clothes and shoes appropriate for their destination. The Eyes-of-the-Gods supervise the process meticulously. When the slaves have been prepared, they're taken into the holds of the ships."

Ikai looked at her in confusion. "How do you know all this?" he asked. A trace of suspicion was nagging at his mind.

Albana glared at him, defiantly, reading his doubts.

"If Albana says…" Liriana began.

But Albana interrupted her. "I know, because I've spied on them and because I've seen the Eternal City."

Ikai reacted. "Do you mean to say you've been to the Eternal City?"

Albana sighed deeply, and nodded.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Ikai wanted to know.

"Would you have believed me? Anyway, it's something that only concerns me. I don't have to explain myself to you."

"But nobody's ever come back from the Eternal City. That makes you someone really significant."

"There's a reason why no one ever comes back…"

"What reason's that?"

"The Gods make sure they don't."

Sensing her hostility, he decided not to press the subject, at least for the moment. "You're right. I apologize for being so direct, it's none of my business… But you have to understand that I'm desperate to find my sister Kyra."

Liriana intervened. "We asked Albana to lead us here, to somewhere which would give us access to the Eternal City, and she's done it. We don't ask anything more of her, and she owes us nothing as she's already done her job. We're very grateful."

Albana nodded and went on: "The last building, the round one a little further back, is one of the artifacts of the Gods."

“Artifacts?” Liriana asked, staring with narrowed eyes at the round building with its black marble walls.

“That building is a gate.”

When he heard this Ikai tensed, and his eyes were fixed on Albana’s. This was something he needed to understand.

“I don’t know how it works, but somehow, used together with the power of the monolith, it might transport people… in both directions. I know that because I’ve seen it. But I don’t know where it leads. Maybe to the Eternal City, maybe not.”

“It might be our means of entry,” Ikai said hopefully.

“Do you know how to activate it?” Liriana asked.

Albana shrugged and shook her head. “There’s an Enforcer of the Gods who operates it and guards it. He’s different from all the others, he looks more like a priest than a warrior. He’s the only one I’ve seen activate it. Not even the Eyes can.”

“As I see it,” Liriana said, “we have two options: the slave ships or the artifact.”

Albana was silent, watching the port area.

Ikai was lost in thought.

“The artifact isn’t used very often. I don’t know why.”

“That’s strange, they could use it to transport materials and slaves instead of using ships,” Liriana suggested.

“Yes, but they don’t. There must be a reason… a very good one.”

“Interesting…” said Ikai, wondering what that *very good reason* might be.

Night came, and the last rays of light faded. This was the crucial step, and he knew it. If they failed now, everything would be lost. They would either capture him or kill him and he would never reach Kyra. He looked at the two women before him and took a deep breath. Before taking the final step he needed to resolve several unknown questions. He could not go into the wolf’s den without having the information he needed.

“I have to go. I must rescue my sister.”

Albana winked at him. “You do know it’s madness, don’t you? You’ll never get in. And if by sheer miracle you do, you won’t come back alive, still less with your sister. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about.”

“Even so, I’m going. I don’t care how impossible it might seem or how little chance I may have. I have to rescue her. If I die, so be it.”

Albana shook her head. “Nobody comes back alive. You’ll die, or even worse, they’ll send you to forced labor until you rot.”

“You managed to get away and you’re here with us,” he said, trying to get some more information out of the enigmatic brunette.

“I’m an exception, a very rare exception,” she said. She half-closed her eyes. Then she smiled, with a bitter smile born out of suffering.

“I’m coming too,” Liriana said firmly.

He turned to her uneasily. “Why, Liriana? What reason do you have? Your own friend says it’s madness. The chances of coming back alive are practically nil. Think it over. You have so much to live for. Your cause…”

Liriana folded her arms. “You have your reasons, I have mine.”

“But what are you going to do there? Tell me that, at least.”

“I’m sorry, Ikai, I can’t. The less you know, the better for both of us.”

There was a tense silence. A tension born of distrust grew until it was almost palpable. The three exchanged wary looks, and none of them spoke. The cool of the night brushed their skin, and Ikai shivered. He looked over his shoulder at the lights of the port of the Gods. He weighed up his options and came to a decision.

“I’ll try at dawn. It’s now or never. If we wait one more day, the Hunters will catch up with us.” He could read a warning in their eyes. “I’ll take the first watch if that’s okay with you.”

Albana and Liriana nodded silently. He sat on a fallen tree a little away from the two girls, and the night went by as he watched the three ships left in the port, illuminated by the dancing light of several torches. He could make out half a dozen Executors and one Eye-of-the-Gods beside one of the ships. A long line of slaves was carefully carrying huge amphorae and loading them on the ship. *I wonder what’s in them, and how many men will have died to get hold of it and bring it to the Gods.* He sighed. *I must work out a way to get to the Gods’ dwelling. I won’t allow anything else to interfere with my thoughts.* He relaxed within himself, placed his trust in his analytical mind and began to think of possible strategies, along with the complications of the situation and the most likely results. *By dawn I’ll have a plan.*

The hours went by slowly. A sound behind him startled him. He turned quickly with his bow at the ready.

“Relax, it’s me, Albana. It’s my turn now.”

Ikai swore to himself; she was upon him. She had managed to come up to him and almost touch him without his realizing it. If she had wanted to kill him, she would probably have succeeded. The woman had a lethal skill…

“You could have announced yourself…”

Albana smiled in that typical way of hers. “That wouldn’t have been like me.”

“This isn’t the time for humor,” he said, and began to move away.

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “I’ve already planned it.”

Albana came closer to him and whispered: “Listen to me carefully and remember my words, you’ll find them useful. The Eternal City is divided into five rings, five individual rings which float on a calm sea, joined by long bridges. Each ring is the home of a House, each House is a Power. If you want to get to your sister you must find out two things: which House she’s in, and the destination that House has assigned to her. Avoid the Enforcers of the Gods at all times, but most of all you must avoid the Gods themselves, because their Power is limitless. Yes, Ikai, they’re real, they exist, and their Power is insane. They’ll kill you as easily as you squash an ant. For them we’re nothing but that, ants whose function is to work in their service, produce till they die. Understand this if you don’t understand anything else: if you so much as meet the Eyes-of–the-Gods you’ll die instantly… wrapped in flames, frozen alive or struck by lightning. Do you understand, Ikai? Do you understand what I’m trying to warn you about?”

Ikai looked at her almond-shaped black eyes and nodded heavily.

“I know your stubborn heart won’t allow you to turn around and go back, but even if you reach the city, it’ll be impossible for you to rescue your sister. I’m not telling you this to hurt you, I want you to understand that it’s a city of all-powerful Gods, and their ruthless servants watch and control every corner, because that’s their function in life.”

Ikai sighed. “It’s also a city of slaves.”

Albana’s eyes flashed. “True. There are thousands of them there.”

“I’m grateful to you, Albana. Your advice will be very useful to me.”

“Our paths keep crossing, even though our destinies have nothing to do with each other,” Albana said with a smile. She shrugged. “It must be a curse.”

“What will you do tomorrow?”

“I’ll go on my way, because I have a long way to go yet before I get what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“If you survive, I might tell you,” she replied, and tilted her head with a grimace.

Ikai could not help smiling.

“Rest, I’ll watch now.”

He nodded, started to go away and stopped.

“Thank you again.”

Albana looked at him and winked.

With the words of the brunette dancing around in his mind, he came to where Liriana was sleeping.

She heard him and opened her eyes. “Is it my turn yet?”

He crouched down beside her.

“No, sleep easy, Albana’s watching now,” he said in a whisper.

When Liriana gazed at him, her look seemed strange. It was charged with deep sorrow and emotion.

“Everything’s all right,” he said, trying to soothe her. “Sleep.”

He was about to turn and lie down beside an oak tree when Liriana’s hand held him back.

“Would you mind lying here… beside me?”

Caught by surprise, he hesitated.

“It’s a cold, lonely night,” she said. Her sea-colored eyes were dull. “Death could easily find us tomorrow. I don’t want to spend my last night… alone…”

Immediately he understood her feeling of utter loneliness. He felt it too.

“Of course.”

He lay down beside her and looked up at the moon over their heads. Liriana covered his body with the blanket. He wanted to calm her, and stroked her hair. It had grown somewhat, but it was still very short. He felt strange being so close to her, but it was an extremely pleasant feeling. He was more and more delighted by her closeness. The critical situation they were facing was taking its toll on their spirits, he knew that, he felt it. Anxiety and fear clutched at his chest like an iron claw, but Liriana's warmth helped him to breathe, and her company made his spirits rise in a way he did not understand but was grateful for.

Liriana put her arm across his chest, and a stream of emotions ran through his body and mind, sensations he had not felt in a long time. She looked into his eyes, and that spellbinding turquoise swallowed him in its immensity, intensifying even more the emotions he was feeling. She gave him a faint smile. An intense passion awoke in him, a feeling he hastened to hold back. Liriana stroked his cheek and clung to him. At the touch of the girl's body he felt his own burn as if it were in flames. He could not stop looking at her, as though hypnotized, lost in those eyes, beautiful as the sea.

Liriana kissed him. It was a long, deep, passionate kiss.

Ikai let himself go and caught fire in her arms.

He was shaken awake. He opened his eyes and saw Albana crouching beside him with her hand on his shoulder.

"It's time," she said, and gestured at the dark sky. "It'll be dawn in an hour."

He stood up.

"Last night you stretched out your watch quite a bit…" she said, and winked at him roguishly.

He went red, but decided to ignore the comment and motioned her to let it be. He looked for Liriana but could not see her.

"She's gone."

"Without me? She can't have. But why?"

Albana shrugged. "She only said she didn't want to put you in danger as well. She has her mission and she's going to take her chances. If they

catch her… she'll die, because that's what her ideals call on her to do. I don't agree…" She shook her hair to one side. "But I admit it's admirable. I've always liked her for that."

Ikai nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll follow my destiny. I must get to my sister, and that's what I'm going to do."

"In that case I'll tell you what I told her: make sure the Enforcers of the Gods don't see you at the port, because they'll kill you at once. No slave is allowed to be here, outside. It's a capital offense, and you pay for it with your death. They'll cut your head off, that's what the Gods have decreed. I've seen it…"

"I understand…"

Albana sighed deeply. "One last thing: if by some miracle you manage to reach the Eternal City, be careful with that." She pointed at his Ring. "They can track you down through that damn thing."

Ikai looked at the Ring on his forearm and nodded.

"Thank you for all your warnings."

Albana looked at him almost tenderly, something very untypical of her.

"May the depth of the Sea guide your head, and its eternal magnificence your soul," she said. For the first time Ikai knew the feeling was sincere.

"Thanks, the same to you," he replied with the ghost of a bow. "May Mother Sea fill your days and Father Moon guide your nights."

Albana returned his slight bow.

"Don't linger here. The Hunters will arrive shortly after dawn."

"Don't worry, I'll be gone by then."

He nodded, got his things ready and with a light step disappeared into the night.

The darkness which surrounded him was his ally. He had left behind all his weapons except his throwing dagger, and also got rid of his traveling

satchel. He would not be needing them. He crawled like a snake without being seen until he had the dock in sight. He narrowed his eyes and took a careful look. The four buildings were in shadows and heavily guarded, with three Executors at each door and several on patrol at the back. *I can clear those with a bit of luck, but not the ones at the entrance.* On the pier another three Executors guarded the access to the three vast ships, which were anchored in a peaceful sleep like giant wooden demigods.

Everything was quiet, so that a silence which threatened his plans covered the cove. He watched the buildings, then the ships. He inhaled deeply. *I commend myself to you, eternal Oxatsi, our wise Mother Sea. Watch over this son of your people.* He set off, moving his body with as much stealth as was humanly possible, using his Hunter's training to make himself into the prey which must avoid capture. He hid behind a clump of bushes and watched the Executors doing their rounds. He calculated and waited. The patrol finished their round and turned back, then began in the opposite direction.

Now! He crawled to the foot of the great pier. He had not been detected. He looked up towards the buildings and thought he saw movement on one of the roofs. *Hell!* He threw himself to one side and hid himself under the pier. He waited for a tense moment, fearing the alarm signal. But it did not come. He breathed out heavily. *By a hair's breadth!* He could not wait any longer: light would come shortly and he would be found out. He got into the water without any noise and calculated the distance to the furthest ship, the one they had been loading with amphorae. Too far; he would not manage to make it without coming out to breathe, and if he came up to breathe he would be discovered. *I have no choice.* He breathed three times to fill his lungs, each time inhaling more air. He exhaled until he was completely empty. He breathed in one last time, filling his lungs till he thought he would burst, and slipped into the water.

It was cold, dark… and salty! He swam underwater with quiet but powerful strokes, propelling his body as far as possible each time, desperately trying to gain distance. On his left he could see the submerged part of the great ship's hull. He stayed calm and went on. When he had come three quarters of the way, the air in his lungs began to run out. He felt the pain of it, more and more urgently, more and more anxiously, but he could not put his head above water, the Executors would see him. *A little more, just a little more. Oxatsi, give me strength, don't leave me now.*

The agony became insufferable He was going to drown. And at that moment he saw it: the great chain of links attached to the anchor. He propelled himself forward with one last desperate whip of his feet and reached it. He emerged just far enough to push his nose out of the water and breathe, hiding behind the huge links. He breathed deeply, panting and stayed close to the chain, closing his eyes to avoid being seen. He listened apprehensively.

Nothing.

He risked a glance. He could see the three Executors standing on the pier in front of him. But the distance between them seemed to be enough to mean they would not detect his presence. He let out a muffled sigh, but he had still not made it. There was one last movement, extremely dangerous, and he had to measure it exactly or else he would be a dead man. Dawn was just breaking, night was fading and the light of the great sun was beginning to peek above the horizon, as if it were leaving Mother Sea’s bosom. He tensed his muscles and made himself ready. He would only have one chance.

Dawn finally arrived. He filled his lungs, put his head under water and held on to the chain with both hands and feet. He opened his eyes under the salty water and waited. The air began to fail him, but he waited.

Not yet, a little longer.

And the doors of the buildings opened. New Executors came out to change guard. Those on the bridge and beside the three ships began to withdraw.

Now!

Ikai took his arms out of the water, reached for the chain and pulled his body upwards. With all his strength and the swiftness of despair he climbed up the chain as if he were being chased by hungry lions. In the blink of an eye he was aboard the ship. He crawled along the deck, panting and aching from the effort. The new Enforcers would arrive in an instant; he had to be quick. Without looking back he dropped into the hold. He struck his shoulder and hip hard when he hit the bottom. He muffled a cry and with a grimace of pain on his face, managed to get to his feet and ran to hide at the back.

Steps came from the deck; the Executors were taking up their positions.

Ikai breathed out silently. *I did it! Only just, but I managed it!*

He risked a glance outside through the hawsehole of the anchor. What he saw left him both surprised and proud. A long line of slaves was boarding the next ship. Liriana, dressed in the clothes of a slave was boarding at that moment. Then he remembered the shadow on the roof. *Not a guard after all, it was Liriana… risky, very risky, but she managed to get in among the slaves without being discovered.*

Ikai smiled and shook his head: *Very clever.*

22

Kyra stared at the great avenue with its crowds of people. The magnificent causeway was flanked by more than a hundred huge statues of gallant warriors and fierce lions. But these were no regular passers-by but Gods who strolled unworried, revealing their golden splendor, surrounded by their retinues. They ruled over that cosmos, lords and masters of every pore of the timeless Eternal City. Kyra walked with head bent alongside two other maids of the House of Eret, closely following Lord Adamis and his Champion Rotec. Behind them, walking in silence, were an Eye-of-the-Gods and four Custodians. Kyra watched everything out of the corner of her eye, trying to fit together the pieces of this unusual universe with its extravagant exuberance.

"Where are we going?" she whispered to the two maids beside her. They eyed her apprehensively and put a finger to their lips.

I don't know why I even bother. I've been with them for a week, and the only thing I've managed to understand of their strange languages is their names. Moa, ruby-skinned, smiling and joyous when the Gods were not present. Zita, fearful and restless, with that unbelievable green skin. The two of them beautiful, much prettier than she was herself.

They seem nice girls. They've been here for quite a while serving in the palace. But fear never leaves their eyes. I need to find a way of communicating with them so I can learn everything they know. Perhaps they have some idea of what's in store for me, even though for the moment they haven't been much use. I need to find Yosane and Idana. Where could they be? At least I'm still alive, and I hope they are too. Yes, they must still be alive, by Mother Sea.

They reached the end of the great avenue and entered a huge round plaza. It looked like a giant amphitheater. Every few steps, on the tiers, were merchant stalls in the shape of small limestone buildings. Two groups of musicians were playing, one in the northern part and the other in the southern, vying to carry their pleasant melodies to the center of the grand

plaza. *It seems the Gods like music… I can hear flutes… and harps… and drums…*

Approach, slave, came Adamis' distinct mental voice. Her mind had grown used to receiving the God-Prince's messages, even though her pride screamed with rage every time he called her "slave".

She sighed deeply. *I must control my temper. Be smart. Think like Yosane, act like Ikai,* she reminded herself, and went to stand on Adamis' left. Rotec, on his right, gave her an unfriendly look, raising an eyebrow as he did so. Kyra ignored him and turned her gaze toward the center of that incredible plaza.

Today is market day, a day for the enjoyment of the senses, Adamis said with a smile, and with a wave of his hand he showed her the flamboyant stands where the merchants delighted the Lords. The stalls were like tiny palaces where each golden merchant presented his exotic wares, smiling ceaselessly at the curious divinities.

"What… what are they selling?" she asked, rather too loudly.

Adamis shook his head. *Keep your voice down. It is not allowed for a slave to address a God. We are drawing attention to ourselves, and I prefer discretion as far as possible. As long as you remain close to me you will always be able to listen to the conversations of the Gods around us, as I do. I am certain that you will find them interesting.*

She made an effort and lowered her voice to speak to him, but control was not exactly her strong point. "All right," she said in a whisper. She looked on without understanding all the incredible objects, exotic materials, and unusual animals exhibited there. She had never seen anything like them. A series of sweet, stirring smells reached her from different directions on the gentle breeze, intoxicating her senses.

Adamis gazed at her with his intense gray-blue eyes and smiled. *What your eyes behold are the richest silks of the most unusual hues, the dresses with the most intricate embroideries, the most exquisite jewels crafted by the finest master goldsmiths, the most exotic birds from lost paradises, spices and products which only exist in the remotest corners of the world, and of course weapons and armor of every kind and power. It is a market of delicacies where everything hard to obtain and desirable is sold at an exorbitant price.*

Two Gods in elegant brown silks, followed by their retinue, passed in front of them and greeted Adamis with a bow. He and Rotec returned the greeting respectfully. Kyra saw distrust in the Champion's eyes.

And these Gods and their retinues, who strut like peacocks, stopping at every stall to gaze at the wonders exhibited and at the same time showing off their social status, are the wealthiest and most powerful of the nobles.

She shook her head and gazed at the Lords at the stalls. "I don't understand… you're Gods… they lay everything you could dream of at your feet… you swim in abundance, in luxury. In the palace there's enough food to feed three Counties, the statues in it are made of gold, the walls of the best and purest marble decorated with golden runes, the curtains are of such delicate silk I'm afraid to touch them." She shook her head again, looking around at the giant city with all its splendor and ostentation. "All this immense city is made of gold and silver. Even the floor we're walking on is rich marble."

Adamis nodded. *Indeed, but even Gods cannot have everything,* he said, his eyes on her. *To be more precise, not all Gods can have everything, because that in itself is impossible. We swim in abundance and we surround ourselves with infinite riches, it is true. That is our right as an advanced and powerful civilization. And we assume that right. But not everything is infinite, there are things which are finite and unique and hence become more desirable, since not all can make use of them, even though they might wish to with all their soul or power.* He looked long into her eyes, then turned back to the plaza. *This market gives the most powerful and richest of us the chance to obtain those precious objects.*

"I thought the slaves provided everything the Gods wanted. That such was our place in the world, our sole reason for existence," she said, trying to minimize the note of irony in her voice.

Adamis half-closed his eyes, guessing her intention. *And so it is,* he went on. *Practically all. The slaves are the basis of our economy. More than a thousand years ago our Erudites planned a complex socio-economic and political system which would guarantee wealth and the basis of stable government for our society. Since then we have progressed towards new intellectual goals, leaving behind mundane tasks in order to dedicate our time to more elevated objectives. A prosperous economy is the foundation of*

an advanced society. The economic system we adopted guarantees practically infinite prosperity.

Kyra could not hold herself back. “Enslaving the rest of the world,” she said.

Adamis shook his head. *Follow me. Let us enjoy the market. And try to restrain that tongue of yours.*

For half the morning they went from one stall to another. And she saw amazing things: from animals whose name she would never know to jewels and dresses so exquisite they left her speechless. She would never have anything like that herself. Adamis exchanged greetings and chatted with other nobles. Kyra watched every detail, just like her brother would. She had noticed one significant thing: the colors the Gods wore seemed to indicate the House they belonged to. A Lord in shades of blue approached to talk to Adamis. Kyra nodded toward him and held up three fingers to Zita and Moa. The two maids shook their heads almost imperceptibly. Moa held up five fingers. Kyra understood: this Lord belonged to the House of the Fifth Ring. But there was something else about that Lord which had caught her attention: he was the one the sphere had assigned Idana to, Lord Saxti. Now she knew Idana was in the Fifth Ring, and that knowledge gave her hope.

Nearby, she saw a Lord dressed in clothes of striking red and orange, and raised her eyebrows at her two companions with a nod. Zita held up two fingers. The same colors as the ruthless Lord who had taken Yosane: Lord Asu. Her friend was in the second ring; now she knew. And that knowledge encouraged her to find out even more about that world, with a single purpose: to survive and escape.

Adamis said goodbye to the Lord and turned back to her. *Lord Saxti says I am too permissive with my slaves, that I should be very careful. He warns me that the nobles speak badly of me behind my back… It is not at all well-regarded among the Lords that I should take so much interest in you, and of course they do not approve of this behavior in a Prince. What do you think, slave?*

“That they’re right,” Kyra replied uncomfortably.

Adamis was amused by this. Kyra saw him laughing for the first time, and somehow his humor made him more human. Rotec turned, scandalized,

and tried to hide his Lord's conduct so that the other nobles would not notice that the God-Prince had laughed with a slave.

Adamis regained his self-control. Still with a smile on his lips, he said: *You asked me what I want of you, why I give you special treatment. I will tell you. It is because you intrigue me. You are not like the other slave girls; you have indomitable character and personality, and that makes you very interesting. Nobody has made me laugh like that in a long, long time. Of that you may be assured.*

"Well, if you want to know anything about me, you'd better remember my name. I have one, and you know it."

Adamis threw his head back and raised his eyebrows. *Very well, Kyra.*

"That's much better."

Adamis nodded. *It is a very pretty name.*

"Thank you."

Adamis frowned, though only the trace of a golden line appeared on his forehead. *Anyway, I advise you not to chance your luck with me… the whims of Princes may be trifling…*

She swallowed. She would not try to take things any further, but at least she had obtained some small satisfaction, and her rebellious soul was shouting with joy. Suddenly the center of the plaza began to clear, and those present stopped browsing at the shops to pay attention to what was happening. Lord Adamis commanded his retinue to withdraw a few steps, while in the center a rectangular podium was slowly being erected. Two Eyes-of-the-Gods stood beside it. Custodians appeared amid the crowd, leading a line of slaves. They were chained, and belonged to different races. They were led to the elevated platform. Something caught Kyra's attention: many of the men were extremely strong, as much so as the guards themselves, although there were also some older men among them, and the women were notably beautiful and delicate. She felt ugly and ungainly in comparison.

"What are they going to do to them?" she whispered to Adamis.

Watch.

Two Custodians made the first man get on the platform, and one of the Eyes joined him. The Eye-of-the-God showed the slave to the audience: he was mountain-sized, with straight blond hair and skin white as snow. He

wore only a loincloth. Kyra saw several of the Lords raise one hand. She frowned at Adamis.

It is an auction. They are bidding for him.

“For a slave? I don’t understand, they have thousands of them!”

It is the same concept as with the other objects and animals sold in this market of wonders. They are precious objects. We have thousands of slaves, it is true. Each of the Five Houses has them. They ensure economic stability and allow us to grow showing our splendor to all rival Houses. We are powerful, and with that power comes vanity, and unfortunately it tends to take over. If one House raises a statue to the heavens, the others will soon build one taller, more beautiful or more exotic, to demonstrate their power to their rivals and ensure that they never forget it.

“It’s insane.”

Adamis nodded slowly.

It might be, but that is our culture, our society, and so it has been for a long time.

Kyra watched another slave being auctioned. “And what are we?” she asked. “Have we no value?”

Of course you have value. All living things have value.

“But not the same value.”

Adamis sighed and considered his reply, as if it were a difficult question for him. Until that moment Kyra had never seen him in doubt.

No, not the same value. Not here.

“We’re just ants who produce so that the Gods can enjoy infinite riches without lifting a finger. If we stop working, if we complain, then we’re crushed mercilessly.”

Unfortunately the law of the strongest reigns. This is a maxim which is true in every civilization. It is one of the laws of Mother Nature. Look at those two chained slaves, one black as the night, the other red as the sunset, both of them powerful warriors. Little over a thousand years ago, when we decided to enslave men, these two men’s races were killing each other. They killed, raped, plundered whole villages and took slaves, since there is always one people stronger than the rest, and so there always will be. Yet now there is no bloodshed. They are slaves, yes, but there is no war between their peoples.

“Changing one evil for another doesn’t make things any better.”

True. They all serve us and enjoy long life if they do what is expected of them: which is to be slaves, neither more nor less than that. There are no wars now, and here, in this city, there is no sickness either. It has been practically eradicated.

“Are you really saying that justifies the slavery of an entire world?” Kyra was glaring at him and her fists were clenched.

Adamis stood very erect.

Let me remind you that I have nothing to justify, since as far as you and your people are concerned I am a God. A God-Prince. But I will tell you one thing: if your people were not a slave people, it would have been annihilated by that giant’s people a long time ago. He nodded towards the slave being auctioned at that moment, a hulk of a man with black hair, dark skin and such a stern face it seemed sculpted out of hate.

She felt a strong desire to smack the vain God’s face. If she could somehow leave a mark on his beautiful features, her happiness would be complete.

Suddenly the giant managed to elude the Custodians and jumped off the platform, screaming like he had gone crazy. Kyra’s heart skipped a beat. The giant ran to one of the Lords and his retinue. The Lord, dressed in brown, threw his head back in surprise. The giant lunged at him, his manacled hands reaching towards the God’s golden neck.

Kyra watched in fascination. She saw Rotec take out his sword and cover Adamis with his own body.

The Lord who had been attacked murmured something. At once the ground opened before him with a loud crack, and a claw of rock rose suddenly and closed on the giant like a granite pincer. The Lord took a step back. Three of his Custodians moved forward and stabbed the imprisoned slave to death mercilessly.

Kyra could not hold back a cry of horror.

The Lord murmured once again, and the rock pincer turned into sand and fell to the ground. The Custodians dragged the dead slave away. The auction went on as if nothing had happened.

Don’t fool yourself, that’s what’s in store for you too, Kyra said to herself. *Adamis is no different.* One thing, though, had caught her attention.

The Lord defended himself, he feared for his life. And a doubt came to her mind, a crucial doubt.

"Can you Gods die*?"*

Adamis turned to look at her in surprise.

Of course we can die. We all die. Gods or not. That is an important law of Mother Nature. We are not immortal, if that is what you are asking, although we would like to be. This is what our Erudites have been searching for, for several millennia, without results so far.

"Even at the hands of a slave?"

The face of the God-Prince grew sterner.

Do not imagine so much, slave. As you have seen, it is practically impossible for a slave to lay a hand on us, much less kill us. If I so wished, I could put an end to your life right where you are with a snap of my fingers.

She realized her mistake and pulled back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. I'd never dare raise a hand against a God," she lied, taking care to soften the expression on her face. "It's just that the High Priests have always told us the Gods are immortal and eternal. That's why I was surprised by what happened. That was all," she finished in a level voice.

Adamis eyed her for an instant as if he were trying to assess her sincerity. At last he smiled.

All right, but do not forget my warning.

A question suddenly came into her mind. The answer to it might be a great help to her. She considered carefully how to phrase it to avoid offending him.

"That Lord has used the Power of the Gods," she asked at last. "Hasn't he?"

Adamis stopped watching the auction.

Yes, he used the Power. One of the types of Power, he clarified.

She softened her expression, not quite smiling, and curled her red hair around her finger.

"The same Power you used on me?"

Adamis half-closed his eyes.

No, it is not the same Power. Each House is in tune with a certain type of Power, but all come from the same basis: Mother Nature.

"Nature?" she asked innocently.

Yes, from Arutan, our Mother Nature. The Lord who used his Power belongs to the Fourth House, and is in tune with one of the five basic elements of Arutan: Earth.

She had to hold back her desire to ask him another hundred questions, but she did not want him to guess she was interrogating him and then stop answering. So she decided to calm down and try to find out what she really wanted to know.

She took a deep breath and said:

"What I don't understand is… if the Gods are so powerful… what do you need us for, us slaves? Can't you simply create the food, the wine, the riches?" Her intuition told her there was something which made this impossible. She had not seen any God do anything of the kind. In fact now that she came to think about it, she had not seen anyone using the Power openly, which was really strange if they were as powerful as that… She had to find out why, because there, in all probability, was where these creatures' weak spot must be.

Adamis threw his head back and watched the sky thoughtfully.

Kyra was afraid she might have gone too far with her question.

But Adamis answered her. *No, unfortunately our power has its limitations,* he said with a long sigh, dragging out the words reluctantly as if aware he should not be revealing such things to a slave. *Our Power is nurtured by Nature, by the five elements which form her, and makes use of them. But our Power cannot create life, objects, not in that way. We can only manipulate the five basic elements and their natural power.*

Kyra risked herself further. She had to understand. "When I saw the Power at work, I thought it was all-powerful."

Not at all. Furthermore, there is a universal law, an unalterable one, which rules it: all Power has a price, a price which must be paid. In our case, the price of this Power we have been blessed with is our own existence.

And in those strange words of Adamis, Kyra found what she was after: the seed of hope. If the Gods were not all-powerful and had a weakness,

there was still hope. For her and for all men. But she preferred not to go on trying to find out; the risk was too great.

To change the subject, she asked. “Are you going to buy any of those slaves?”

Adamis turned to watch them. *Yes, that is precisely why I have come. There is one who interests me especially.*

“Would it be one of those exotic beauties?” said Kyra, unable to restrain herself. She regretted it at once and bit her tongue.

Adamis looked at her in amusement. *No, your race doesn’t interest me, at least not in that sense…*

Kyra blushed until her face was like a ripe tomato. Her cheeks were burning.

I am interested in him, he said, nodding at the next one to be auctioned. An old man who seemed not to have too many mornings left to him.

“Him?”

Yes, he is a jewel, a very precious jewel. And today he will be mine.

For two whole days and nights Kyra went over every detail which the conversation with Adamis at the market-place had revealed to her. She had found out a lot. The Gods were not immortal, and their Power, although it was immense, was limited, and more importantly, that limitation might be what would allow them to be outwitted. She needed Yosane, who would know what to make out of all that information.

Ikai would be proud of me. I kept my temper under control and I got some valuable information. But at the moment I can’t think what I can do with it.

She looked out of the window through the bars and thought of Ikai. She recalled his kind face, his loving nature. He was so different from other older brothers… he did not give orders and expect to be obeyed… He had always treated her with love and respect. He loved her very much, and she knew it. He always protected her and looked after her, still more so since that fateful day when their father had been taken away. He never said a word about it, but she knew very well that she herself was the reason he had

been taken. The cause of the ill-fated incident. It was a burden she would always carry in her heart, a burden the size of a mountain. Ikai had never reproached her, nor did he tell their mother. *I could never wish for a better brother.* She started to feel distressed, and remembered Ikai's smile and his calmness. A cool, calculating calmness which she envied and could never attain, because her own spirit flared like lightning and she could not often manage to restrain herself. Not like her brother. She sighed and felt herself relaxing.

She was kept in that room under lock and key, so that although she had seen something of the palace she had not seen much of the Eternal City. She had counted thirty or so resident Gods: Adamis' family, the court of the House of the First Ring. For some strange reason the Queen, a woman with eyes cold as a winter morning, wished every room to have a different herbal fragrance, and the slaves did their utmost to please her. Kyra had asked Zita and Moa for the King, Adamis' father, but they had both shrugged. They did not even seem to have ever seen him. Was he dead?

The door opened and Rotec walked in. There was barely room for him within it.

The mental blow reached her. *Come, my Lord awaits.*

She did as she was told and followed the Champion. Without a word he led her outside the palace and through the streets of the city to a strange oval plaza. In the center there rose five white, immensely broad monoliths. She counted more than twenty Gods sitting on comfortably upholstered chairs. But something caught her attention about them. They were not young, like Adamis and Rotec, they were… *old* Gods. She stopped in her tracks and watched them curiously. She had not seen old Gods before, and the sight impressed her. Even the Queen, who must be of a certain age, did not seem to have aged more than a little, for her features were delicate and her beauty very obvious. Her hair was beginning to be silvered, but she still kept a certain freshness. The men there were very old, their golden skin spotted with ochre and their hair snowy and straight. But what caught her attention most was the state of their bodies: they were gaunt and withered.

Come on, Rotec said, *they're waiting.* She was startled out of her thoughts.

She saw Adamis beside the central monolith, together with two Gods, remarkably old, who were leaning on heavily ornamented silver staffs.

Rotec bowed elaborately before the three Gods. Kyra, not really knowing what to do, remained two steps behind him with her head bowed and her eyes fixed on the white marble.

One of the old Gods raised his hand, waved his hand and left.

Kyra, come closer, came Adamis' mental message.

When she reached him, she tried to imitate the bow Rotec had given.

The Gods smiled, and that made her a little less nervous. She noticed the older God, who wore a long white robe with the image of a tree inside a circle embroidered in silver on the chest.

This is Notaplo, one of the most prominent Erudites of the Five Rings. He belongs to the House of Eret, our own House.

She looked at his eyes, which were clear, blue and deep. There was great understanding and wisdom in his gaze. She was fascinated by how human the eyes of the Gods were. Looking into them she forgot the golden skin, the extreme slenderness, even the power which emanated from those beings.

Good morning, young slave, the Erudite said. His voice in her mind was so deep and resonant that she stepped back when she received that powerful mental message.

"Good… morning…" she said, overcoming the impression.

My good Prince tells me you are a young girl of some interest, with a lively spirit, full of decidedly awkward questions.

Kyra was aware of the heat spreading across her cheeks.

Do not be afraid. Having lived nine hundred years has this effect: one loses one's patience easily and tends to go straight to the point of interest as fast as possible. He smiled, showing a mouth full of very dark teeth.

"Nine hundred years?"

That is correct, child. In my eyes you are no more than a baby, practically new-born. And as you can see from my gaunt appearance, I am not immortal. I will die in another hundred years or so as the last drops of my Power dry up, and with that my existence will go out forever. I believe this was one of the questions which interested you.

"Yes… well… will you really die?" Kyra asked, unable to fully accept that the Gods, those powerful beings, could die.

Notaplo nodded slowly.

We still have not reached immortality, child, although we pursue it ceaselessly. He remained thoughtful, his gaze distant.

“But then… if Notaplo is nine hundred… how old are you, Adamis?” she thought aloud.

He folded his arms. *This summer I turned one hundred and eighty.*

“One hundred and eighty! But how can that be? You don’t look much older than I am!”

In reality I am not. In human years I would be eighteen. Our longevity is approximately ten times your own, a little more in fact. Although it also depends on whether we make appropriate use of our Power.

She was left speechless. Adamis had already lived a hundred and eighty years, and she had only lived seventeen. She felt lost.

Notaplo returned to reality, as if stirring from a dream. *From what my Prince has told me, this particular subject interested you greatly, which has made me think: why would a slave want to know these details?*

Kyra looked at him, mortified. She had no idea what to say. “I was just trying to understand…”

Our society? Our Power? Curiosity is a two-sided coin, my child. It might bring you insight or terror, even lead you to unexpected death… One must be very careful with what one wishes to know, for the answers one obtains might not be the ones expected.

She lowered her head and said nothing.

This place around you, the Erudite went on, *is a place of gathering and study. There is one in each Ring, and in them for several millennia we have studied and documented what has become the foundation of our society. Economy, Medicine, Politics, Religion… all have been studied by the most brilliant minds among us. The Erudites you see, all of them, have devoted their lives to study, to the improvement of our society. All their discoveries, all their advances are stored and safeguarded in these five Pillars of Wisdom.* He waved toward the monoliths.

She stared at them, her imagination caught. Now she understood why they were not black like the others she had seen.

Notaplo breathed deeply and exhaled, leaning on his staff. *But most of all, and above all, we have devoted ourselves to one concrete subject: the search for immortality, for that is the goal we all pursue.*

Kyra remained expectant, waiting for the old God to tell her more.

Now, if you want me to answer the question eating away inside you right now, you will have to do me a small favor.

“What is it?” she asked.

Notaplo took out a small dagger from his robe and handed it to her.

I need a cut on your hand.

She thought twice about this, but considered her situation and decided. With a swift slash she cut the palm of her hand. Blood began to flow.

Notaplo nodded. *I see you are very determined. Place your hand on the central monolith.*

She looked at Adamis, seeking confirmation. He nodded.

With her hand bleeding, she went up to the monolith and placed it on the snowy surface.

There came a powerful vibration, and she was suddenly bathed in a beam of white light which explored her from head to toe in three consecutive passes. Then the light vanished and so did the tremor. She moved back, a little stunned.

Notaplo came forward and placed his hand on the monolith. A golden circle appeared and surrounded it as he closed his eyes and concentrated. The golden circle blinked. He withdrew his hand and opened his eyes.

And then he looked at Kyra. *The answer to your question is: yes, immortality is possible, and no, we have not yet discovered it. But today we are a step closer.*

23

Liriana was carrying two large buckets of water, trying not to spill them as she passed through the crowd of slaves. The sound of the whips broke out in her ears, and the suddenness almost made her lose her balance. Wherever she looked she was surrounded by slaves in brown tunics and blue headscarves. They worked ceaselessly, drawing what little strength they could from their weakened bodies. She went past an Oppressor and lowered her head at once, as she had been told to do. She reached the group led by Foreman Tulmis, the one she had been assigned to.

The old slave, bald and gray–bearded, waved towards half a dozen men lying semi-conscious on the ground. “Hurry up, water-bearer!” he shouted.

Liriana hurried to them and helped them drink from the big wooden ladle she carried at her back. No matter how much water she might give them, those unfortunates would not be able to bear the terrible effort they were being forced to make. They were working on the construction of a giant structure behind the gardens of the Royal Palace of the Fifth Ring. She had arrived just three days before on the slave ship, and it already seemed like months. Her ploy for getting there had been successful. Slipping in among the slaves, passing as one of them and taking ship for the Eternal City without being discovered, had been reckless. *Fortune smiles on those who dare,* she said to herself, and smiled. If they had caught her trying to get in through the roof, the Executors would have killed her on the spot for being outside the Boundary. *Death also smiles on those who dare, and her smile is broader and more attractive,* she thought, and shook her head. Now she was inside the Eternal City, and she had to go on with her mission, which was vitally important for the Senoca people.

“If one of them dies, you’ll take his place,” Tulmis threatened her.

She glared at him defiantly.

On the day of her arrival at one of the big ports of the Fifth Ring, they had been lined up in a row. She guessed it would be the Eyes-of-the-Gods who decided her fate. But to her surprise five foremen inspected the cargo of slaves and distributed them, not without arguments. It all happened under

the attentive glare of several Oppressors. Liriana had been selected by old Tulmis.

“Military, good arms and legs. You’ll be the water-bearer,” he had told her after looking at her Ring and inspecting her muscles with his dirty, wrinkled hands.

She had had to swallow her pride. She was no longer a Captain of the Regent’s Guard, she was now one more slave in the midst of a city both magnificent and dreadful. What little she was discovering of the Eternal City made her wonder, while at the same time fear ate at her stomach with teeth sharp as knives: a beautiful city on the outside, but terrible inside. On the first evening she had discovered that the slaves were led to great underground chambers next to the harbor, where they were crowded like cattle for the night. As soon as they arrived, Tulmis had taken the new ones to a corner by the fire. There he had patiently explained what to do and not to do, as well as who the Oppressors, Custodians, and particularly the Gods, were. Liriana had listened attentively and afterwards had asked among the slaves, to gather as much information as possible about this place and the Gods who lived there.

She watched as the colossal granite block, to the rhythm of a drum, moved over thick wooden tree-trunks foot by foot. Her group, more than three hundred strong men, was dragging it, pulling with braided ropes. The effort the job demanded was agonizing. The humidity was very high, so that tunics and headscarves stuck to the body. It was difficult to breathe. Doing that work in those conditions was suicide.

“Stop looking at the others and work, or I’ll have an Oppressor flay your skin off!” Tulmis said menacingly. She half-closed her eyes. She was about to reply, but thought better of it. The old man had only one thing in mind: survival. And for that he had to exploit everyone in his team, since two Oppressors were watching him closely.

He’s an intelligent old man, he’s not risking anything. Here only the strongest and cleverest survive. That much I can see. Tulmis did not offer either help or favors. That way he made sure he lived to see another day. It was his own life or that of his group, and he had a great love for his own.

Liriana went on doing her job as she watched the other groups working. The first three were busy raising the blocks and placing them on top of each other in the correct position. The last two groups dragged the

heavy pieces to the site where they would be raised. There were more than a thousand slaves there, hauling with all their might, struggling not to die that day. The scene was dramatic and devastating: a scene repeated every day. And every day slaves died.

But she was there for a reason, and nothing or nobody would stop her, forced labor, Gods or Oppressors. *I must carry out my mission. Gedrel needs me.* She clenched her fists tight and went on with her work. If she did not give the slaves water, they would die from dehydration, or else from the effort. The oppressors' whips lashed above the cadence of the drum and the slaves' muffled moans, making up the most mournful of melodies. A symphony of suffering which never stopped all day, to be renewed the next.

Suddenly there came a terrifying scream. It was followed by the noise of wood cracking and the harsh grinding of granite sliding over granite. She turned towards the noise. The screams of horror now came from hundreds of throats. Wide-eyed, she saw that the wooden supports of the upper granite block, which was being raised at that moment, were breaking. The enormous block fell from a height of thirty feet. First it hit Foreman Mirtez's group, crushing dozens of people amid screams of panic and agony. The block's momentum carried it on towards Liriana's group, knocking over another twenty slaves and two Oppressors as it went. The great block reached her amid panic-stricken screams. Her fellow slaves let go of the ropes and jumped out of its way. With a deafening noise the granite block hit the one they were dragging and cracked in two. One of the halves stuck on the ground.

The other flew towards Tulmis. The old Foreman could not react. He simply covered his head with his arms in the face of the impact which was about to crush him. Liriana leapt towards him. The great mass of granite brushed past them as they rolled on the ground.

"You… you saved me…" the old Foreman muttered in disbelief.

Liriana stood up, shaking off the dust. Around her she noticed hundreds of gazes stabbing her like knives, reproaching her for saving the Foreman. She ignored them. Foreman or not, she would not let anyone die. She watched the scene of death and destruction caused by the accident, and her heart sank.

When night came, on the underground level, after the corpses of the dead had been loaded onto a big funerary ship, her mind went over things in

silence. So many slaves died that the Enforcers kept the ship anchored some way from the port and went on filling it with embalmed corpses. Once it was full, it took them who knew where and got rid of them. Far out at sea, Liriana guessed. It was called the *Ship of the Dead*. Not a prayer, not even a simple goodbye to the dead, nothing. The place was devastating, and the despair of those men was absolute.

She looked up at the ceiling, *What'll have happened to Ikai? I wonder if he's managed to get here. Yes, he most likely has. He's intelligent, strong, he'll make it. I wish we could have done it together, but my plan was already too risky for one person. It would have been suicide for two. I'd never forgive myself if he lost his life because of me. I hope he's all right…* She sighed. *I have my mission and he has his. Our paths run parallel but are very different, like our goals. I must focus on my objective. A lot of our people depend on it, and that's what really matters. I can't let myself be swayed by my feelings…*

"Tulmis wants to speak to you," a voice whispered in her ear.

Liriana turned her head and saw a man walking away. At the far end, in a corner, his corner by the fire, Tulmis was watching her. He beckoned her to come close.

She went over to the old Foreman.

"Did you call me?"

"Yes," he said in a whisper. "I want to talk to you."

"All right," she murmured, and sat down beside him.

"What you did today… very few would have done it…"

"I'm not like most people…"

"Yes, I've noticed that. And it's precisely why I wanted to talk to you. First I want…" He cleared his throat, as if the words were choking him. "I want to thank you for saving my life."

"You don't need to."

"Yes, yes, I do. Most, probably all, would have let me die, and even celebrated. Only a handful who are in my favor would have been sorry, and then only for the benefits they'd have lost. But nobody would have risked themselves for me, I'm sure of that. I've been here many years, and it's not often you see an act like this."

"I just acted on instinct."

“A heroic instinct that few men have. And those who once had it, in this sinister world of Gods and slaves, have already lost it. I’m a fair man, even though your fellow slaves don’t believe it. That’s why I’m offering you the chance to enter my circle of trustees.”

Liriana looked into the deep brown eyes and saw no lie in them.

“I accept.”

“Very well, I’ll make sure you don’t die and that you enjoy some *benefits*. But something in your gaze tells me you want more…”

“Yes.”

“I owe you. Ask me.”

“I want to know where the slave Maruk is, and how I can get to him.”

“Hmmm. That’s very complicated. To begin with, there are thousands of slaves here in this city, and as you’ve seen, they’re of different races and lands.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that, and it puzzles me completely. I’m looking for one in particular. His name is Maruk. He’s twenty-five years old, thin, with strong arms, green eyes and dark hair. He’s a Senoca, of the First County, a Craftsman, an unrivalled worker in metal. His fame precedes him. He was captured and brought here very recently.”

“Hmmm. It may be possible to find him, but it’ll take some time. You see, he might be in any of the other four rings.”

“Do you have any way of contacting the slaves in the other rings?”

“Foremen have *ways* of communicating with each other. With time, patience and a great deal of stealth, we’ve woven a great spider’s-web over the Eternal City. When there’s a vibration at one end it’s transmitted to the other. The web is formed by the thousands of slaves who are on the surface by day, and the underground levels at night. The Enforcers control the movements they can see, but they can’t see the thousands that are made simultaneously. That’s the way we avoid their iron control. For every thousand simultaneous movements, by just evading one, we get a vibration which is sent on through the spider’s-web.” The Foreman smiled. “Still, what you’re asking comes at a high price.”

“Higher than your life?”

“Hah! I like you, soldier, you’ve got guts. No, there’s nothing more valuable than life. And that’s why I’ll grant you what you want.”

“Thank you.”

“Just out of curiosity, who is this young Maruk? Lover, family, enemy?”

Liriana breathed in and thought for a moment. “Lover.”

“I see. I’ll look for him, but bear in mind, he might not even be alive.”

She nodded, and wished with all her heart that he was, for herself, and for her people.

It was midnight when Ikai slowly emerged from the water: first his eyes, then his nose, and finally his neck. The pier was empty, so he took the risk. Crawling like a snake, he hid among the shadows until he reached the shade of a huge fountain. He had spent hours in the water waiting for the Custodians to withdraw, and his tired body was grateful for the touch of wood and stone.

During the day he hid in the water or in some poorly-watched ship. To try and reach land would be suicide. The Enforcers of the Gods were everywhere. He had risked getting close on a couple of occasions, but had almost been discovered. It was four days since he had arrived at the Eternal City, as a stowaway, in the cargo ship. The vessel had docked at one of the harbors of the Fifth Ring, and he had waited until well into the night before he left it and began to explore, with extreme caution. For two days he had studied the ring, the Enforcers of the Gods, their routines, the occasional conversations and orders which were exchanged, trying to make sense of this new world around him. Two days risking his life at every step to obtain valuable information.

Early in the morning of the third day he stole a small boat and moved to the Fourth Ring under cover of night. That was where he was now, trying to get some clue about where they might be keeping Kyra prisoner. He had found no trace of his sister, but he did not lose hope. He would manage to find her. He began to crawl along the ground towards the inner part of the Ring. *I’m so close, so close, I can’t fail now.*

He drank from the fountain and rested for a moment. He put his hand inside his shirt and took out Master Sejof’s gauntlet. He thought of leaving it behind. Then he touched his belt, where he carried the leather pouch with the Falcon Eye. *I’d better keep it,* he decided, without really knowing why.

He put the gauntlet on his right hand and went on, always looking for the shadows and moving away from the light.

As he crawled through the domains of the Gods, he heard footsteps. He stopped and stayed hidden in the darkness. His trained Hunter's senses gave him a definite advantage in the shadows of the night, since the Custodians on watch duty were huge and their movements slow and very heavy. You could hear them coming practically half a league away, and see them even before that. Two of them, making their rounds, passed not far from him, but did not see him. He had to be careful, the patrols were constant and the palaces all strongly watched. One mistake and he would be a dead man.

Where have they got you, little sis… where? For a moment the terrible uncertainty froze his chest, as if he had been hit by a storm of ice and could barely breathe. Would she still be alive? *Of course she's alive! Don't even think otherwise,* he scolded himself, shaking his head firmly. *She's alive and I'll find her! I'll find her and take her out of here, by Oxatsi, our Mother Sea!* But he still had no idea where to look. He pondered over it very carefully, as he was in the habit of doing, even though Kyra scolded him for it. During the days he had spent in hiding he had kept a close eye on everything that went on in that universe in the middle of the sea, trying to understand it.

After thinking about it, he decided to go to the largest palace, the one which belonged to the Lord or King of the place. Kyra had been selected at some Summoning, not for a quota. She had been selected for some specific reason, which was why it was more likely that she might be in the hands of a ruler. Sesmok's face came to his mind, and it was as if someone had poured cold water on his face. Carefully, he avoided three more patrols and reached the foot of the palace. He was already near. He crawled on a little further, fleeing from the light.

Suddenly the Ring on his arm began to shine with an intense gleam and gave out a shrill shriek. *Oh no! They're going to find me!* He could not understand what was going on. The Ring had never done this before. He lifted his head slightly above the bush he was hiding behind and then saw it: a monolith, twenty paces away from him. It was not very tall, the size of a Custodian. He moved back immediately as fast as he could, and the Ring stopped giving out flashes and shrieks.

The damn monolith acts as a guard! I can't believe my bad luck. I don't just have to dodge the Custodians, I have to dodge those guardian monoliths too. Hell!

While he was protesting he was crawling back as fast as he could. His ears had picked up the heavy running steps of three Custodians. He had been discovered.

I have to get out of here, fast!

He crawled on like a crazed snake. He did not dare glance back.

The heavy boots could be heard coming closer and closer. They were almost on top of him.

I have no choice. I have to run for my life.

He stood up and ran away like lightning, leaping over bushes, dodging benches and statues. He kept running keeping into the shadows. The Custodians, much larger and heavier, could not keep up with him. He reached the harbor, then dived straight into the water without stopping. He went under and swam on underwater, away from the shore.

A little more, just a little more, he told himself, with his lungs on the point of bursting from lack of air.

At last he surfaced and breathed until his lungs were filled. He watched the harbor in the distance, where four Custodians were searching. Luckily he was far enough away, and hidden in the darkness. He was in the great channel which ran through the Five Rings towards the central island of the Eternal City. Carefully he moved away until he was in the center of the channel.

He watched the Custodians searching for him on dry land. *They haven't realized I jumped into the water.* He snorted with such relief his spirit nearly flew out. *Phew! That was close!* He shook his head in disbelief. Then he saw the boat, with the strong light at its prow shining on the water. *They're searching for me in the channel!* He breathed in through his nose to fill his lungs and went underwater at once. He swam as if there were hungry crocodiles after him. He surfaced to take air, risking being seen, and went on swimming underwater. At last he reached the opposite shore and hid under a pier.

Exhausted, panting, he watched them looking for him on the opposite shore. The search went on for hours while they combed the entire area. While they were looking for him his thoughts turned to Liriana. He felt a

tingling in his stomach as he remembered the turquoise of her eyes, her brave gaze, firm voice and fierce determination. And her legs… her soft skin… he blushed at the memory, feeling a pleasant warmth and sense of wellbeing rising up his chest. Where could she be now? He had lost her at the harbor of the Fifth Ring; she had been taken along with the rest of the slaves. She would be all right, he was sure of that. He had never known anybody more determined. And he remembered the night they had shared. Ikai knew it would remain in his heart and memory forever. *Will we meet again, Liriana? Yes, I have to believe we will. Our time together can't have been so short. Yes, we'll meet again, I'm sure of it.*

Shortly before dawn the search stopped. The first light of day appeared, soft and warm, and he felt calmer. He came out of the water and hid among some rocks to dry himself in the sun.

Kyra, my sister, where are you?

Thinking about her, wishing with all his heart that he would be able to find her, unconsciously his hand strayed to the necklace she had made for him. He fingered the little carving of a seahorse as he watched the sun bathing his tired body. The feeling of wellbeing rocked him and he drifted away, closing his eyes. At that moment something vibrated at his waist.

What on earth… he wondered uneasily.

He moved his hand to the source of the vibration and found it was the disc of the Falcon Eye. It was hot, burning, and he had to hold it in the palm of his gloved hand. *What's going on?* he wondered, fearing another trap, like that of the Ring. He stared at the crystalline disc and watched the gold nugget inside it. He recalled Sejof placing it over his Ring. He looked around, seeing no-one, and set himself to imitate his old master. He ran the disc over the engraving of the eagle which identified him as Hunter. The Ring flashed, and the disc rose above the Ring to hover in the air a hand-span above his arm. He watched in puzzlement. The disc began to shine with an intense silver light. Suddenly it sent forth a beam of silver light towards the island at the end of the channel, in the center of the Eternal City.

He stood up at once. What had happened? Why had the Falcon Eye activated itself? And how? He had done nothing… And then he remembered the necklace. He had touched it with the gauntlet… and Kyra had made the necklace… He began to see the sense of it.

I think the Falcon Eye has just told me where you are, little sis.
He looked at the big island on the horizon.
I'm coming, Kyra. I'm almost there.

24

The Custodians escorted Yosane and Gersa to an underground antechamber of the Royal Palace of the House of Aureb, the House of the Second Ring. An Eye-of-the-Gods waited impassively between two braziers. The flames danced, consuming the air around them and giving off a black smoke, which gave its surroundings an eerie halo. As in all the Kingdom, it was very hot in the chamber and smelt of burning. It always smelt of combustion and embers, even in the palace.

Yosane grasped Gersa's hand, and although she was afraid all the time, she tried to hide the fact. Gersa had been crying continuously for several days, and no matter how much Yosane tried, she could not comfort her; although, in spite of their initial fear, nothing horrible had happened to them. They had not been ill-treated. Rather the opposite: they were kept locked in a spacious and luxurious room in the palace. They even had maids to serve them. And that was precisely what worried Yosane, worried her obsessively.

We're like two frightened goldfinches shut up in a golden cage. Why are we being treated differently from the other slaves? We haven't been sent to the harem, thanks be to the seas! We haven't been forced to labor under the whip, not even to serve as maids. Why? The Gods never waste a resource, a unit of production, without some reason. Their law has always been: produce or die. And we aren't producing anything…

"Wait here. Lord Asu has requested your presence," the Eye-of-the-Gods said in his strident voice.

When she heard the sinister Eye speak, Gersa began to sob, as if she could tell that some great evil was about to fall upon them. Yosane felt the same thing, and she became as uneasy as her friend.

What can this all-powerful, cruel God want from us? Nothing good, I'm sure.

The two great doors of the chamber opened, and the huge form of Iradu appeared, like a walking mountain. Lord Asu's Champion stared at

them sternly for a moment.

Follow me, slaves. And stop trembling. I'm not going to eat you today, he said mentally from his imposing physical presence.

Yosane was stunned. She noticed the ghost of a smile in the corner of the strong Warrior-God's mouth, and relaxed. He was joking. Gersa on the other hand was looking up, wide-eyed, at the ceiling. It was the first time she had heard the voice of a God in her head, and she was trying to take it in, without success.

They went in after Iradu, the room was huge, and left Yosane open-mouthed. It was built in the form of a three-sided pyramid. The walls were polished red, with strange runes engraved in silver. In the center was a rectangular monolith, thick as an oak-tree, also red, which disappeared into the top of the pyramid more than sixty feet above. Yosane wondered at the incredible underground structure, and her mind tried to guess at the impossible calculations which had allowed that extraordinary chamber to be built.

It's amazing. How could they have built it? I'd give anything to know how to build something as magnificent and beautiful as that. Everything I've learnt with my father seems trivial in comparison. Maybe one day I'll be able to understand the secrets hidden in the unbelievable architecture of the Gods.

Then she noticed Lord Asu beside the monolith, and her fascination turned into apprehension. Before her eyes, her foreboding turned into reality. Beside the God-Prince a slave girl was kneeling on top of a pedestal with her hands tied behind her back. On the other side of the monolith two Custodians were dragging away the dead bodies of two other young girls under the scrutiny of a second, older God. A third, ominous, figure, dressed in dark clothes and wearing a helmet with a strange mirror-visor which covered his whole face, watched behind Lord Asu. Yosane stared at him curiously. This sinister individual was as large and strong as a Custodian, but his skin was different, ochre-red, and his swollen veins too were red. This being was a different type of Enforcer, one they had never seen before. For some reason Yosane had the feeling that he was an extremely dangerous one.

These slaves you have obtained for me, Master-Spy, are of very low quality, the older God said. *They are not good enough for my experiments.*

Oskas has done his duty as always. The one who has failed is you, Moltus, said Lord Asu.

My Lord…

Be silent! I have to talk about an important matter with my Master-Spy. I will deal with you later, Erudite.

Moltus lowered his head and was silent, fearing for his life.

Lord Asu turned to Oskas.

How is it progressing, the mission I charged you with?

"It's progressing well, my lord and master. My spy reports that we'll soon be able to capture the person of interest."

That pleases me, it pleases me a great deal. You are as astute as you are lethal. But I warn you, Oskas, do not fail me, I need to find that slave. If you fail me now I shall let Moltus experiment on your body again… and on your mind too, particularly on your mind. I know how much he enjoys that.

"I shall not fail you, my lord. My spy will find the slave you're searching for, and he'll be yours, my lord."

Very good. Go back to the shadows where you belong, and keep me informed of anything new.

The Master-Spy bowed in farewell. In the blink of an eye he had disappeared, melting into the shadows of the room.

Yosane saw him leave, and shivered. Then she looked more closely at the chamber and had the feeling she had set foot in a macabre torture chamber. An icy shiver ran down her back.

Protect us, Girlai, our Father Moon, don't let our lives be taken today.

Iradu bowed elaborately before his lord. *The Selected, as you ordered, my Lord.*

The cruel face of Lord Asu turned to them. The sinister ruby eyes, half-closed, blazed with uncontainable anger, almost fury. The Prince turned to Moltus.

A new failure. Once again that is all you have found for me, Moltus.

Moltus came forward with his head down. He limped visibly and was old, very old, even for a God. His body seemed so decrepit that as he walked he leant on a jewel-encrusted wooden staff. His head was not clean-shaven; instead he had long silver hair which hung down to the middle of his back. His eyes were a frozen ice-blue, and on his right temple was a

black burn which disfigured his wizened, copper-golden skin. He wore an orange robe trimmed with red lace. At his waist was tied a wide white sash with a strange golden rune.

My powerful Lord, I have been searching for more than eight hundred years, ever since I was a young apprentice, trying to unravel the mysteries of life and the Power, seeking to solve the greatest enigma ever posed. The voices tell me I am close: very close, they tell me. They whisper at night, they speak to me when I sleep, and their message is clear: the day is about to come, very little time remains. The voices tell me so, my powerful Lord.

You damn crazy Erudite, you and your voices!

I have been searching all my life… One day is no more than a tiny drop in the lake of time, so the voices tell me…

When you reneged of your own people and I opened the doors of my powerful House to you, it was on the understanding that you would achieve what I so long for. I do not readily offer my House's protection; very few have been so honored. And not only have I provided you with my protection, I have also given you everything you have asked me for: from slaves to the greatest Power. Two centuries have gone by since that day, and still you have given me nothing but failures.

My Lord is wise. He expects a reward for his investment and patience, and that he shall have. For him I will obtain what the other Houses do not even dare to dream about. I have seen it in my dreams, and I know. The voices tell me. I have always known I would achieve it, and the day is already near. The voices no longer whisper; now they shout strongly.

Stop talking about the voices, you crazy old man! Let me remind you that I only have to mention to Adamis that his renegade scientist, his crazy erudite, is hiding under my Chamber of Knowledge, and he will demand your head on a silver platter. I will have no choice but to satisfy his demand so as to prevent a war between the Houses. Is that not so, Iradu?

The Champion nodded. *That is so, my Lord. A war would not be advisable at the present time.*

Moltus raised himself to his full height. *Ah… that foolish Adamis, vain prince of Ether. He believes he is in possession of the absolute truth, and yet he is no more than a pretentious brat.* Moltus rubbed his lame leg. *I owe this to him, and I do not forget, the voices remind me every day, nor do I forget that he wanted to lock me up for life when he found out about my*

little experiments. No, I do not forget. One day he will pay… he will pay with suffering beyond anything he has ever dreamed of.

Forget that imbecile Adamis and concentrate on your experiments! Get me what I want, or I swear I will put an apple in your mouth and roast you alive over a slow fire like a piglet! Asu shouted in such a rage that when he clenched his fist, a flame enveloped it.

Moltus bowed immediately and remained with his head bent, fearing for his life.

There was a sepulchral silence, and a strong tension took hold of the place. The flame around Asu's fist steadily grew in intensity, as if it represented the mounting wrath of its creator.

My Lord… your Power… Iradu warned, seeing his Lord was not growing any calmer.

By the Fire! Give me what I want! Asu thundered again, and the temperature in the room began to rise. After a moment it was a boiling pot.

My Lord, Iradu insisted.

Asu turned to his Champion, then stared at the flame, which was burning intensely blue. Yosane and Gersa fainted, suffocated in a sea of sweat, almost unable to breathe. Asu's eyes were still fixed on the intense flame in his fist.

Every moment I keep this flame burning is a moment the Power robs from my life, even in the midst of this atmosphere of Fire – he pointed to the torches and great braziers decorating the walls – *which lowers the consumption of the vital essence the Power requires. I can feel it scraping time from my existence.*

He extinguished the flame and turned thoughtful.

The voices know it, said Moltus. *The Power we have been blessed with comes with that price. It is a rule Mother Nature imposes on her children, and we are no exception. The Power cannot be unlimited, or Nature herself would perish. No, that is why when one of us uses the Power, he consumes part of his vital essence, because that is what it feeds on. Those who are not careful and measured in the use of the Power will age at an accelerated rate, like those poor slaves.* He gestured towards Yosane and Gersa. *Their race has neither the Power nor the capacity to live as many years as we do, but they have other virtues which we do not: they reproduce with amazing ease. The voices compare them to rabbits. The Power is dangerous, for it*

captures us, it makes us superior, it fools us into using it when we should not. And once all the vital essence of the body is consumed, Death awaits unequivocally, for all, slaves and Gods alike. Moltus waved his arms like a madman. *The voices are always warning me: "Do not use your Power, for you can no longer pay the price, old man".*

I will not end like you, you decrepit old lunatic! That I assure you, you fool! Find me a way of using the Power without letting it consume me, and you shall live the days which remain to you like a king!

But you see, my Lord, that is the reason for my eternal search: to attain immortality and go on living, with or without the Power. Our wishes follow parallel destinies, and I will find both, since my life depends on it, in all senses. He giggled.

I do hope so… Asu said, his ruby eyes glaring. *You asked me to bring you the Selected. Here they are. I need not remind you that their destiny has already been decided… there is one week to go before the full moon.*

Of course, my Lord… I would not dare… a glorious destiny… the importance of the sacred ritual…

All right, go ahead. Asu withdrew a couple of steps.

Moltus clapped twice. *My disciples, I need you,* he said, and three Gods dressed in very much the same way came out of the shadows. These were young Gods, although their bodies were famished.

The old Erudite pointed at the manacled slave. Two of the disciples held her, but she was so terrified she did not struggle. Moltus went over to a round container in front of the monolith. It was tubular, with a silver body and doors sealed with a rune.

Power, he demanded.

The third of the disciples stood between the monolith and the container. He placed one hand on the monolith and the other on the metal object. When he closed his eyes, a flame of Power enveloped him. The monolith gave out a red flash, which ran up the arm of the scholar as far as his body, then into the container. This reacted to the Power and knowledge transmitted from the monolith and radiated a brilliant crimson light. The doors of the container opened and a cloud of smoke came out from inside.

The reactive, Moltus said. He reached out a wrinkled hand to take out a potion in a crystal bottle.

The young woman was forced to drink the dark potion.

While the Gods watched her, the slave began to convulse. They held her hard until the tremor subsided. Her eyes turned completely black as the irises disappeared and were replaced by blackness, as if she were possessed by an evil spirit. Moltus went closer to her and studied her carefully.

The voices say it is time to experiment, he said with a sinister giggle.

From his robe he took a disc, which he placed over his right hand. The object was slightly concave, the size of an orange and the thickness of two fingers. It was as black as the eyes of the unfortunate girl. On the upper side of the disc two silver circles shone in the light of the torches. Moltus put the disc on the slave's forehead, and there was a metallic snap. The Erudite took his hand away, and the disc remained stuck to the girl's face. It divided into two, and the upper part began to spin while the rune flashed at intervals. Black veins began to appear on the young slave's face. After a few moments they turned a more intense black, as if the disc, in its spinning, were corrupting her blood so as to putrefy it. The girl became rigid, staring at the sky with her arms stretched backwards and her mouth open, rigid as a corpse. Moltus' helpers withdrew their hands, and they all watched the macabre spectacle as the black veins spread from her face, down her neck and all along her body. In a few moments they took over the body and limbs. All the veins in her legs and arms were picked out in a gloomy black, as if some pestilent illness had invaded her.

The disc stopped spinning, and the girl fell to the floor.

Dead.

Moltus went over to her and removed the disc. He studied the two circles and shook his head.

Nothing, my Lord, he said sadly. *Not one speck of vital essence has she yielded*.

You damned fool! Asu roared. *Are you sure the reactive is the right one?*

I am indeed, my Lord. It is the most accomplished so far. I will show you. Moltus waved a hand and his helpers seized Yosane's arms.

No, not her, Asu ordered. *She is Orange. Use the other.*

The scholars held Gersa, who was crying and screaming with terror. Yosane realized what was coming and lunged forwards to help her friend.

She tugged hard at the arm of one of the Gods who were holding Gersa. A powerful arm took her by the waist and lifted her into the air.

Do not struggle, little slave, you can hurt yourself, Iradu told her, keeping her under his arm like a rag doll. *The crazy Erudite knows what he is doing,*

Gersa was made to drink the reactive. She went rigid.

Moltus pressed the disc to her forehead. The metal snap was heard again, and the disc began to spin. Gersa's veins began to turn black.

"Noooooo!" Yosane yelled, and kicked Iradu to make him let her go.

But something else happened: the outer circle of the disc began to turn golden, and gave a flash.

Moltus smiled and clapped excitedly.

That's enough, stop it, Lord Asu ordered them.

The Erudite withdrew the disc from Gersa's forehead, and she fell to the ground. Yosane thought they must have killed her. But she started to breathe, haltingly.

In three days there will be no mark left on her, Moltus said.

You answer with your life, Lord Asu said to him menacingly. *She must come to the ceremony intact. She is sacred.* He jabbed the Erudite's chest with a finger.

Moltus nodded and lowered his head.

O*nce more you have showed me your inability to give me what I want. These are the Selected. It was discovered long ago that essence of life could be extracted from them. But that does not interest me. There are barely a dozen of them each season, and there is nothing I can do with that.*

They are a rare commodity, yes, very rare, Moltus said, rubbing his hands, *and we only have two from this harvest.*

Iradu looked down at Yosane under his arm.

It is they who guarantee the balance, through the equal distribution at the ritual. But if one of the Houses found the way to harvest more essence of life, or more Selected… then the balance would be broken.

War, yes, war, the voices say.

Asu raised his fist to the sky. *I must find a durable source of essence of life, and in that way manage to regenerate the Power my body consumes. I want to give free rein to all the power within me without fearing the*

consequences, without being consumed, without aging and dying. A few Selected each season, destined to the sacred ritual of Vivification, are of little or no use to me. I cannot touch them, and even if I could, there are too few of them. I need to obtain vital essence from all slaves, you wretched senile fool! As he shouted, he gave a wave of his arm. It sent an explosion to flash against the wall.

Everybody froze silent, motionless, afraid of their lord's wrath. Asu exhaled.

There are thousands of slaves, and they will beget thousands more. They are the key which will allow us to be able to use the Power without limit, without fear, without restrictions. Find me the way to obtain essence of life from the slaves to regenerate myself, and I shall be the most powerful of all the Lords. My House will be the most powerful, we shall be invincible. We shall break the cursed enforced balance between the Houses which I am currently obliged to respect. They will have to submit, to kneel at my feet, before my limitless power! Nothing and no one will resist me!

Silence took hold of the chamber once again.

Moltus stepped forward and bowed to his Lord. *I will obtain it for you. I am very close now, so the voices tell me, and the voices are never wrong…*

Asu glared at him with eyes of red-hot iron. *The full moon is near. Make sure it is not the last one you enjoy.*

Leave that one to me, my Lord, he said, pointing at Yosane. *The voices tell me that from her we shall obtain the knowledge we need.*

The ceremony… Iradu put in.

Leave no discernible marks, Lord Asu said.

Moltus laughed under his breath and rubbed his hands. *They will not be visible, my Lord, I guarantee that.*

Yosane had no idea what was going on, since she could not hear the conversation between the Gods, but the look of sadness on Iradu's face when he left her on the platform warned her of the hell which would soon descend on her. A tear ran down her cheek when the door closed and she was left alone with the old man.

Protect me, Mother Oxatsi, protect me.

25

Night was falling when the Oppressors gave the order to stop in the form of five simultaneous cracks with their punishment whips. All the slaves stopped at once, letting their arms hang as if they were heavy maces, their bodies defeated by exhaustion and weakness. Liriana left the buckets of water on the ground and headed to the meeting point. All the slaves formed up behind their Foremen in lines of twenty men. An Oppressor went up to Tulmis.

“Count, Slave Foreman,” he ordered in his hissing voice.

Tulmis lowered his head in respect, turned to face his work crew and began to count aloud. One by one he counted all the members, while the Enforcer watched the scene without missing a detail. A little further forward, three other crews formed behind their Foremen as they made the count for the night. Liriana wished this last routine torture was over. She was exhausted, and saw that several of the men would not be able to stay on their feet for much longer.

“299,” he said as he came to the end of his count.

“One dead?” the Oppressor asked.

“Yes, one.”

“Show me.”

Tulmis pointed at Holstes’ corpse, covered with a ragged cloth, a poor peasant from the Third County. All the evil the poor man had done in life had been to grow wheat for the Gods and feed his family with the gleanings. The Oppressor went to Holstes and uncovered the body. He took his machete from his belt, then with a clean cut slit his throat. Liriana looked away from the cruel scene. The Enforcer put his weapon away and went back to Tulmis, who waited impassively for the order to leave, as he did every night. But that night something out of the ordinary happened.

Suddenly, and to everybody’s surprise, a tall, slender figure dressed in rich silks appeared on the lookout which rose above the work-site. Liriana was speechless at the sight of that being’s golden skin and the realization

that it was neither a man nor an Enforcer; she was before a God. She looked at him, eyes wide, choking back a cry. After the God came two Eyes-of-the-Gods, taking notes of everything in their books, and behind them waited a dozen Custodians.

She stared at the God. He must be in charge of the construction; he seemed to her an almost mythological being. They had talked so much about rising against the Gods, of opposing their yoke, but it had always been against an abstract entity, since nobody had ever seen a God before. And there he was, in front of her, the one responsible for the enslavement and suffering not only of the Senoca but of other peoples and races, that slaver who forced them to work until they died. And then she felt that all the effort, the terrible risk she ran, was worth it after all.

"On the ground, slaves! Show the respect you owe!" came the order.

They all dropped down immediately and stayed there on their knees, their arms stretched forward and their foreheads on the ground.

"Not a single glance! Or it will mean death!"

Nobody even tried to blink, fear overpowered them. Not so Liriana. Although she was well aware of what was at stake, she risked a furtive glance.

So that's what a bloody God looks like. So long imagining what they'd be like, and now I can see one with my own eyes. They exist, yes, and they're golden, just as the legends tell. But they're something more than that, because even from down here I can feel his Power. Well, we're no longer fighting against something formless, abstract, we're fighting against a creature of flesh and bone. And now, no matter how powerful or different he might be from us, I'm sure he can be defeated.

The God looked at them for a moment, and she averted her eyes in fear of being discovered by that being's power.

"Rise!"

She rose amid the clatter of a thousand men getting to their feet at the same time, and saw that the God had left.

"Leave!" the Oppressor ordered.

Tulmis lifted his arm and gave the signal. In an orderly manner, the first line left for the underground levels. The second followed immediately, then the rest. The same process was taking place with the other five crews.

One thing she had to admit about the Gods, and particularly the Eyes: they were extremely well organized, efficient and precise.

She went into the *Catacombs*, which were what the slaves called the great underground cells where they were kept, and dropped down beside a fire. Presently they would be served a miserly portion of dirty soup and a piece of stale bread to feed themselves with. Every night she went to sleep with her stomach rumbling despairingly.

“The Foreman wants to see you,” one of the slaves said to her. He was an old man from the Fifth County who did not look as if he would last more than six months longer.

She went across to Tulmis, who nodded at her in greeting.

“You have news for me?” she asked uneasily.

He glanced around the room. “Sit down and lower your voice,” he said. “Our conversation isn’t for strangers’ ears.”

The young woman ran her fingers through her short hair and sat down beside the old Foreman. One of Tulmis’ helpers served them their portions, and they ate in silence. All around them the slaves ate, sitting on the ground on thin blankets, keeping their distance from their Foreman.

When they finished, Tulmis left his clay bowl on the floor and said:

“Two strange stories have come to my ears.”

Liriana arched an eyebrow and waited for the explanation.

“On the one hand they whisper,” he said, looking ahead into the chamber full of slaves, “that you were a Captain of the Guard in the capital, no less. That’s an important post… I don’t usually have workers belonging to the higher ranks of the Guard…”

“There are always exceptions…”

“Yes, that’s true, but for some particular reason.”

Liriana kept silent. She was not going to give him any explanation.

“On the other hand, there’s the rumor that you belong to a certain group… one with subversive ideas… and very dangerous ones… and that you’re very well-connected…”

Her gaze searched the hall, trying to find a familiar face among the slaves, someone who might know of her relationship with Gedrel. But she did not recognize anybody. They were all Senoca, that she already knew; the damned Eyes were efficient even in that. Each Foreman had a crew of

slaves of his own kind. They only mixed races when the casualties in one group were high and they needed to replace laborers. No, she could not recognize any of them. Most were peasants from the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Counties: the poorest. They had never set foot in the capital. All they knew about was crops and suffering.

“The rumors aren’t even close to being half-truths.”

Tulmis gave her a crooked smile. “In your case it might be to your advantage…”

“I’m listening.”

“You see… this old Foreman isn’t going to survive long. I know that, just as I’m sure the sun comes out every morning over this wretched city.”

“Nobody here’s going to live long.”

Tulmis shrugged. “It’s the law of the Gods, and here there’s no hope for men. Each man struggles to go on living another day. But the suffering is hard and long. Many give up, like Holstes today.”

Liriana sighed and shook her head. “What’s the advantage for me if the rumors are true?”

“Because this old man will die here, but he has family in the capital.”

“I see… you want something from my contacts…”

“Exactly.”

“Why should I help you? You’re already in my debt.”

“Yes, but you see, I’m going to pay my debt now, and as soon as I do you’ll ask me for something else, and that’s where you’re supposed friends might come in handy.”

“We’ll see…”

“You asked me to find out where the slave Maruk is and how to get to him. Well, your fiancé is in the First Ring, in the House of Eret. It’s ruled by the God-Prince Adamis.”

“Where exactly inside the First Ring? The rings are gigantic, like a whole County.”

“He’s in the twelfth catacomb. He belongs to Foreman Sostos’ crew.”

“How am I going to find it? From the surface the catacombs aren’t visible.”

Tulmis rubbed his legs. “It’s just under the statue of a huge lion, east of the Royal Palace. It’s easy to find.”

“How can I get there?”

“The only way is at night, by boat. If you manage to get close enough without being discovered by any patrol, you can do the last stage swimming, although I recommend you do it underwater… Anyway it’s crazy to even think about, let alone try it.”

“I have no choice. I have to do it.”

“There’s always a choice, young Captain. In any case, that’s the information you asked me for, and I got it for you. My debt’s paid.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. The gleam in Tulmis’ eyes told her there was something else.

“What are you hiding?”

“Hiding? Nothing at all. I simply think you’ve forgotten one small detail.” He smiled broadly.

“What detail?”

He pointed to the great metal door, firmly locked from the outside. “You’ll never get out of here.”

“And that information is included in how to get to Maruk?” She raised her voice in protest.

“Shhhh. No, it isn’t,” said Tulmis, and folded his arms.

Liriana was so furious she wanted to strangle him, but he was surrounded by his helpers, so it was not a good idea to try and use force. She swallowed hard and thought.

“Here’s where the new deal comes in…”

Tulmis nodded with a smile of triumph. “Exactly.”

“So what do you want?”

“Those *friends* of yours. I understand they take care of their own, they protect them.”

“Yes. We look after our own. If anything happens to one of us, we take care his family doesn’t succumb under the weight of the tribute, or a bad harvest.”

Tulmis nodded slowly. “I have a daughter, Aina. She’s a craftswoman, a very good one. She works as a goldsmith. She must be only a couple of

years older than you are. She's a good girl, with a kind soul, not like her father. If I help you get out of here and get to Maruk, I'm asking in exchange that you care for her as if she was one of your own, as if I was one of your own."

She half-closed her eyes and tried to assess the Foreman. She had not been expecting that of him. She had put him down as a mean, selfish man, and she was surprised. They were silent for a moment. At last she gave a deep sigh.

"All right. I accept the deal."

He offered her his hand. She took it.

"How do you know I'll keep my promise?"

Tulmis' halting laughter echoed against the walls.

"I don't think you'll survive. Nobody's ever managed to escape from here, and many have tried, believe me. Some thought they were very clever and had great plans for escaping. Others simply lost their head one day and tried without giving it any thought. The result's always the same. They all die. They all end up in the Ship of the Dead. But for me this situation works to my advantage. If you die, I lose nothing. If you survive, you'll keep your part of the deal because you're a person of honor, and that'll be your undoing. In either case, I win."

Seeing the triumphant smile on the Foreman's face she was pierced by a terrible cold, as if an icy sword had stabbed her.

The sun had shone all day over the Eternal City, bathing it with its brightness, highlighting the unmatched beauty of the divine metropolis. But now the sunset was close at hand, and both the golden star and the Gods were beginning to withdraw to their pleasant dwellings.

Ikai had stayed hidden for most of the day, under one of the less busy piers, in the eastern part of the First Ring. He had arrived the night before, dodging several patrols and guided by the Falcon Eye. The fact that he had not been discovered was a sheer miracle. Luck had certainly been on his side. With nothing but his abilities as a Hunter, he should never have got as far as this.

Don’t think like that, don’t give up, you’re a step away from Kyra, come on! he said to encourage himself, banishing the doubts from his mind.

He crawled through a garden until he reached a clearing surrounded by great oaks which formed a circle. He glanced to either side and saw several Gods moving away to the north, accompanied by their escorts. They had their backs to him. Taking the greatest care not to be seen and not to make any sound, he climbed one of the trees. Luckily most of the Custodians and Eyes-of-the-Gods were where the groups of slaves worked, or guarding the mansions and palaces of the Gods. The less frequented areas were not much watched, and thanks to Oxatsi, there were many of them.

In the middle of the clearing was a square with several stalls full of goods. It looked like a small market. He climbed to the top of the tree and watched those Gods who were still shopping.

Unbelievable. I have no other words to describe these beings. They exist, they’re as real as we are. I’d always hoped they weren’t, that it would all turn out to be a great lie. But here they are, golden, divine, powerful: Gods. He shook his head and felt a pang of despair, but refused to give in to it.

He knew it was risky to go out into the open before nightfall. But he could not help it, he had to see them by the light of day. He had watched them at night a couple of times, but because of the distance and gloom it had been hard to grasp what they were really like.

Father always said “Know your friends well, but your enemies even better.” A great truth. I need to understand what I’m up against. What are these Gods? What are their weak points? If they have any, that is…

Taking a quick look, he saw a monolith behind two Custodians in the center of the square. At once he glanced fearfully at his Ring. Luckily it seemed he was far enough away to avoid triggering the alarm. A drop of sweat rolled down his temple. He could go no further or else he would be discovered, so he watched them from above. There were no Custodians or Gods close by and it was getting darker; he felt relatively safe.

It’s amazing the risks you get used to, he said to himself, and smiled bitterly.

From the distance he studied the slender golden beings in their rich attires. Some were buying alone, others were accompanied by an entourage and armed guards. He guessed the latter must be powerful Lords. He also

saw a couple of enormous and muscular Gods who must be warriors. From their golden heads a long braid hung down their backs. He shivered to think what would happen to him if one of those mammoths discovered him. None of them was showing off his Power, and he knew they had it, which surprised him. If they were Gods, why did they behave like mere men? It puzzled him. He went on watching them while they made their purchases and apparently chatted, although the only sound that reached his ears was the singing of birds and the touch of the breeze on the branches of the trees.

A God crossing the square caught his attention. He was notably slender, and his poise radiated power. As he crossed the square the other Gods showed their respect with elaborate bows. *He must be someone important here.* He focused on the being's features. Beside this God came another, much more solidly built, with a long braid hanging from his clean-shaven head. His bodyguard, no doubt. They were followed by a slave girl, her head bowed.

The slave raised her head. Ikai recognized her. The shock was such that his heart nearly jumped out of his mouth.

Kyra!!!!

With the shock he began to slide to one side. He was going to fall.

Kyra! Kyra! his mind shouted as he slipped. At the last moment he managed to grab a branch with legs and hands and found himself hanging upside down. He looked at her again and again as she crossed the plaza, unable to believe his eyes. He climbed up again and fixed his gaze on her. There was no doubt about it, it was her. He stretched out his hand, as if he were trying to reach her.

He shaped her name and had to cover his mouth with his hand. "Kyra!"

It's her! It's Kyra! She's alive! She's well! An overwhelming joy exploded inside him, as if his heart were an erupting volcano. Tears of joy rolled down his dirty cheeks.

She's alive and well.

He wanted to call out to her, run to her and hug her. After so long, after all that ordeal, he had found her at last. But his rational mind prevented him. One shout and he would be a dead man. And that would not help Kyra in the least.

The retinue was about to finish crossing the plaza towards the west. He needed her to know he was there, that he had come to rescue her. He needed

to let her know.

How can I attract her attention? How can I make her look my way and see me?

He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. And then an idea came to his mind. Something their father Siul had taught them when they were little children, something Kyra would remember. He put his hand to his face and made a cone over his mouth and nose. With movements he had learnt in childhood, he began to imitate the sound of a barn owl. The first time it had no effect; she just kept on walking, moving further away from him. He tried again. Maybe he was too far away and she could not hear him, but if the hoot was too loud he might alert the two Custodians. He decided to risk it. His hooting sounded almost like a cackle.

Kyra turned.

Ikai stared at her, filled with hope. He stretched out his neck, revealing his head and face above the leaves.

Kyra peered in his direction.

Up here, little sister! Here! Look here! Kyra! He put his hands to his mouth to hoot again.

But the God-Warrior came to Kyra's side and looked in his direction. His heart froze. Fearing discovery, he ducked. Kyra stopped looking, turned around and went on walking after the other God. The God-Warrior kept looking in his direction a moment longer. Then he too turned and joined her. They disappeared through the upper part of the square.

She didn't see me! Noooooo! I can't believe she didn't see me! So close, we were so close! Kyra! A bitter sense of failure and despair gnawed at him.

"So close…" he muttered through his teeth, powerless. Two Gods had his sister… Downcast, he hid among the innermost branches. Then he remembered Siul's determined face and Solma's kind smile, their dear parents, and strength returned to his heart, carried by the invisible winds of fraternal love. He would not let anything scare him. If he had to face two Gods, he would do it without blinking.

I can't let them take her away!

He began to climb down the tree, his heart beating like a war drum. He had to rescue his sister. He jumped down from the oak and took a quick

look towards where Kyra had disappeared. He was on the point of moving when he saw a patrol coming in his direction.

Damn!

He leaned against the rugged bark of the oak trunk and went into hiding.

By Girlai, Father Moon! I won't be able to get to her!

Silently he climbed up the tree again. He would wait for his ally the night. And when it arrived, he would find out where they had taken her.

Liriana was waiting in line for the daily count. A hard day of slave-work, but it was finished now, since night was falling. She was the last in line.

"Today it's a cold meal for us…" moaned Lestos, on her left.

She shrugged.

The Oppressor went up to Tulmis with his whip stretched out.

"Count, Slave-Foreman," he ordered with a hiss.

Tulmis began the count of the day aloud, as he did every evening. He came to the last line.

"280, 281, 282…" —and he collapsed.

They all stood still, staring at the old Foreman. It looked as though he was dead.

The Oppressor's whip cracked. "Get up, you slave scum!"

Tulmis received the lash on his back and shivered with pain on the ground.

"Rise and keep counting, or else I'll cut your throat!" The whip lashed him again.

The Foreman rose slowly. His face was lined with pain, his movements clumsy and feeble. With a great deal of effort he managed to stand, but his legs bent and for a moment it looked as if he were going to fall again. Somehow he managed to keep his balance, and his gaunt body straightened. He took two unsteady steps and returned to his post.

The Oppressor unsheathed his machete.

Tulmis raised his head, blinked hard and took a deep breath.

He cleared his throat. “…284, 285, 286,” he went on.

The Oppressor looked toward the last line.

“…297, 298 and 299,” Tulmis finished, and bent double from the effort.

The Oppressor looked at him for a moment. He put away his machete.

“Leave!” he ordered.

Tulmis straightened up with considerable effort and raised his arm. He gave the signal. The first line left toward the underground levels. The second followed immediately, then the rest. Lestos looked behind him as they entered the catacombs, expecting to find Liriana at the end, but saw only his own shadow.

Tulmis went in after a moment. The door closed behind him.

A smile of deep satisfaction formed on his face.

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Kyra shivered with cold. She sat up in her bed in the prison-room and threw a small blanket the maids had left her over her feet. She pulled the soft linen sheets up to her chin. But a chill ran through her as if someone had passed a sliver of ice down her back. She began to shiver in earnest.

What's wrong with me? Why am I shivering?

But there was something else, it was not just cold, she felt weak… and she never felt weak. This scared her. She had always been able to count on her physical strength, but most of all on the strength of her spirit, even in the worst situations. She remembered when the Enforcers had dragged her father away and the impotence and guilt she felt, all for not having controlled her tongue. If she had kept quiet… everything would be different now… But she had not, and Siul had paid the consequences. Her eyes filled with tears at the painful memory. She had to be strong, get rid of those painful thoughts. Her strength must not fail her now that she needed it so badly.

She felt a sudden onset of dizziness and nausea.

I'm not well… I think… I'm sick. She touched her forehead, she was burning. She felt pain in the palm of her hand and turned it over. The cut she had made with Notaplo's dagger was swollen and was a nasty, yellowish color. *It's infected.* She immediately thought of Idana. She would know what to do, she would heal her with her knowledge and one of her balms or potions. But Idana was not with her, they were keeping her in the Fifth Ring, if she was still alive. Of course she was alive! She had to be! Her weakness was affecting her reason.

She looked out of the barred window. It was the small hours of the morning, and Father Moon was already past his waxing quarter and only a few days short of full. With an effort she got out of bed and dressed. She went to the door and tried to open it. It was impossible, it was firmly locked.

She began to bang it with her fists. "Open the door!" she shouted.

For a moment nothing happened. She breathed deeply to gather her strength, then banged again. Suddenly the door opened abruptly. She was left with her arm raised before two Custodians.

“I need a healer,” she said, her forehead pearled with perspiration and chills lashing her like an icy whip.

The two Custodians looked at her without a word. One of them turned and left. The other one blocked the exit and stood there staring at her.

“So you’re not going to let me out?”

The Custodian pushed her into the room with his shield.

“If I had a dagger… I’d yank that infernal helmet off you,” she said with sudden bravado, although she barely had the strength to stay on her feet.

After a while steps echoed behind the Custodian. Kyra knew at once who was coming to see her. The Custodian moved aside and the huge Champion walked in.

Rotec’s message reached her. *What is it, slave?*

Kyra looked into his eyes. There was no enmity in them, simply annoyance. For the Great Champion of the House of the First Ring, she was no more than an annoyance he had to put up with for the sake of the Prince’s whim.

“I think it’s infected,” Kyra said, and showed him her hand.

Rotec studied it for a moment. *This does not look good…*

Kyra was about to answer, but her legs failed her and she fell to the floor, unconscious.

Kyra… wake up…

She recognized the voice, distant but unmistakable. It was Adamis. With a great effort she opened her eyes and met his own, which were watching her intensely. The gray-blue of those almond-shaped eyes in the beautiful golden face: so human, so warm and so alien. She stared at them, trying to find concern, the spark of humanity the God-Prince must have. Or at least she hoped he had. But she could not see his soul.

Adamis smiled, and his eyes shone.

“What happened?” she asked uncertainly.

You fainted. Rotec brought you here to us with the greatest urgency. You were burning with fever.

“I don’t understand, I was fine this morning. How did I get sick so fast?”

And so seriously. Adamis now sounded worried. He showed her the palm of her hand. Around the cut the flesh was blackened, and it was spreading.

“What?” she asked as she sat up.

When she did, she noticed the curious hall she was in. It was completely spherical and translucent. They seemed to be inside a giant crystal orb. She was lying on a marble table. Behind the table, one of the strange monoliths rose impressively to the ceiling. It too was translucent. She stared in astonishment at the great rectangular artifact which rose about sixty feet from the center of the hall and disappeared at the top. At the end, behind the monolith, she saw three cylindrical pods large enough to hold a person, even one of the enormous Custodians.

“What… what is this place?”

Perhaps I can explain, Notaplo’s deep voice reached her.

Kyra turned and greeted him with a smile. Three Gods followed the Erudite as he walked leaning on his staff, dressed like him but much younger. Her eyes were getting used to identifying the details which marked the age of these beings: the ochre tone of their skin, the dark spots, whether their bodies were more or less decrepit…

We had to call a Healer, he said, indicating a God in white robes who was standing by the monolith with his hand resting on the polished surface and a golden ring around it. *Right now he is taking notes on the strangeness of your case within our sources of knowledge. You suffered an extreme reaction when your blood interacted with the Power of the Monolith. It was strange, and unexpected. There is something in your blood which did not accept the intrusion of the Power. I really only made a small analysis, a tiny infusion of Power into your body, that was all. But the adverse reaction has been remarkable.*

Extremely unusual. Worthy by all means of a more detailed study, the Healer said without taking his hand off the monolith.

“It might be this damned Ring,” Kyra said, raising her arm.

Notaplo gave a small cackle. *You are very clever, and determined. Adamis is right,* he said, smiling at the Prince. *I am sorry, but the Ring stays where it is. That way we can always locate you, and you will not be able to go to places like this without supervision.*

Kyra made a grimace. She had not pulled it off. The Healer came over to her. He took her hand with fine golden fingers and observed the wound. He raised an eyebrow and turned to Adamis.

Must I, my Lord?

You must, Adamis replied firmly.

The Healer bowed in obedience. He put his hand over the wound and a light, something between white and blue, began to flow from the God’s hand and enter the wound. Kyra felt a tingle and a slight feeling of warmth. The Healer kept up the influx of energy for a long moment, then at last withdrew his hand.

The wound has been completely healed, your Highness. I cannot guarantee that there will not be a similar reaction, since there is something rare in her blood. But this episode has been controlled.

Thank you, Healer, Adamis acknowledged with a nod.

If my services are no longer necessary, I shall leave, with your permission, he said. *I have saved all the information in the Pillar of Knowledge.* His gaze turned to the strange monolith.

You may leave us, said the Prince.

The Healer left the chamber.

“He didn’t look very happy about curing me,” Kyra said, arching an eyebrow. The Healer’s reticence had not gone unnoticed, and she wanted to know the reason, although she could already guess.

Notaplo took her hand. *You must not blame our good Healer. In our culture interacting with slaves is frowned upon, and using Power to help them is much worse.* He smiled and glanced at his helpers. *In fact today we have witnessed a small miracle. Forced, yes, but a miracle nonetheless. Very rarely before has one of our people used his own Power to help someone he regards as an inferior being: a slave.*

Kyra narrowed her eyes and bit her tongue. She would not say out loud what she thought about that. It was not the time.

In his defense, my child, Notaplo went on, *I must say that the Power he used to heal you has taken life from him. Not much, it is true, but it has. That is our price for using the Power, and that is why we are extremely careful about how and when we use it.*

"Isn't he a Healer?" she asked. "Isn't his duty to heal? Oh yes, I see, it is, but only for the Gods." She could not disguise her sarcasm. She regretted it at once.

Adamis intervened. *Each of the castes, Healers, Warriors, Erudites, Priests, Merchants, use their Power to perform their duty. They all use it cautiously, but they have a duty to their profession and are obliged by law to do so. Nobody may decide of their own will not to use this benefit, and in this manner lengthen their existence. That would be a burden on society, and also disloyal. The law forbids it. It is controlled and punished, since there are always those who would do anything to avoid dying, or postpone that day as long as possible. But the Power is used only among our own people and for them, as is natural.*

Notaplo cleared his throat. *You must rationalize the use of the Power if you want to reach my age,* he said with a smile, leaning on his encrusted silver staff. *And as you can see, one reaches the top very much the worse for wear.*

The comment made Kyra smile. She liked the Erudite; he was not as haughty as the other Gods, and there was goodness in his eyes.

He cannot refuse an order from his Prince, he would lose his head at once, Rotec said very seriously, his hand on the pommel of his sword.

Adamis took a step forward and put his hand on the Champion's shoulder. *I would never let it get to that point, my friend.*

Kyra breathed the pure air of the chamber and reflected on what had happened. They had saved her life: that of a mere slave, an insect. Why had a God wasted his Power on her? She had to find out, but asking directly did not seem the best thing. She had to go on gathering information. Yosane would know what to do with everything she found out. She would come up with a plan.

One of the scholars went over to Notaplo and pointed to the pods at the end.

It is time, Master. Shall we go on with the experiment, or cancel it?

Notaplo's gaze turned to the Prince.

We go on, Adamis said firmly.

I will take the slave, Rotec said, and came to stand beside Kyra. The shadow of the huge body of the God-Warrior covered her as if she were an insignificant speck.

Adamis raised his hand.

No, wait. She stays.

Rotec's expression was one of pure incredulity. His eyes were wide and staring. *But my Lord, the experiments… nobody who is not absolutely trustworthy and of proven loyalty must see them. The risk… the consequences… consider again, my Lord.*

Adamis put his hands behind his back. *Notaplo, what is your opinion on this?*

The Erudite rubbed his chin, and his eyes were lost in the distance for a moment. *If the little shrew wishes to, she may watch. I don't object. She might even take part…* he said nonchalantly, with a beguiling smile.

Adamis stood in front of Kyra. *If you wish to know some of our secrets you may stay. But there is one condition, a price to be paid…*

Kyra stood up very straight, without cowering. "What is it?"

You will allow Notaplo to perform a little experiment on you.

Kyra looked at him defiantly. She wanted to know what they were up to, what secrets they were hiding. She might be able to use it against them, or else it might turn out to offer a way of escaping from there somehow. There was risk, it was true, but that had never stopped her. Nor would it now. Besides, if they wanted to force her to take part in their secret experiments there was nothing she could do to stop them. She tried to read Adamis' beautiful face, looking for any trace of deception. The eyes of the God-Prince, so alarmingly human, seemed honest. Adamis did not look away, he did not blink, but kept up the tension between them.

Her spirit gradually filled with rage and honor. She felt her heart beating like a war drum, and with that pulse the heat of her spirit and the mixed feelings Adamis provoked in her burst out through her eyes like glittering sparks.

"All right," she said defiantly.

Adamis blinked at the reply. For a moment his eyes disappeared, and she felt as though the chamber had turned darker. The eyelids opened again

and the light returned. Adamis seemed confused, and he was the personification of self-assuredness. Kyra watched him, intrigued. The rage in her chest was dying, and her look was gentler.

Adamis responded with the slightest of smiles. *Very well. Continue.* The tension between them relaxed until it was like a calm sea after a storm.

Notaplo stepped forward. *You will be wondering, little shrew, and rightly, what the purpose of this experiment is. You see… our people, the leaders of the Five Houses to be precise, are trying to find the elusive answers to vital questions which we have been pursuing for millennia. Since the dawn of time the Houses have been studying different disciplines, different approaches, but they all seek the same goal: to reach the longed-for immortality. You see, young slave, Gods we are to your eyes, but we have not attained immortality. Therefore, whether we like it or not, we are not complete Gods, nor will we be. Or at least, not until we attain it. Long-lived we might be considered, since we live far longer than the slave races, and powerful, as we have mastery over the Power of the Five Elements. And with that Power we perform deeds which for all other living creatures are unbelievable, unthinkable.*

"But in the end," Kyra said, "no matter how powerful and long-lived you are, death awaits you just as it does for everybody else,"

Notaplo clapped and laughed, although by the look on his face Rotec did not find the comment funny at all.

Indeed, that is the real truth, the Erudite went on. *If one views oneself in perspective, leaving the ego aside, one might observe that the world around, that wise nature from whom we obtain our Power, shows us how insignificant we really are. What is my life compared to that of a sequoia in the western lands which lives more than four thousand years? What is my power compared to that of Arutan, Mother Nature, or of an erupting volcano, a tornado, a tsunami? Tell me, child, what is it?*

She did not want to upset the Erudite so she toned down her reply.

"Small…"

Adamis laughed. *She wanted to say insignificant, but she bit her tongue.*

She glared at him furiously. Adamis' answering expression was amused.

Each one of the Houses, in their attempts to reach immortality has achieved remarkable advances. Some, like the House of the Fifth Ring, claim to have achieved it. Although their success is debatable, it is undeniable that they have made discoveries which bring us closer to the longed-for goal. I will show you.

Notaplo went up to the monolith and placed one of his hands on the surface. He manipulated the golden circumference which appeared around his palm. From the floor, with a metallic sound, emerged a round platform. Notaplo went on manipulating the monolith, and suddenly a golden ring slid across the outer face to his hand. A beam of light shot out of it onto the platform, forming a living image, in all its dimensions.

Kyra watched the image. It was a large one, and she discovered to her amazement that she was witnessing something taking place before her eyes which was not really taking place there at all. She went over to the platform and passed her hand through the projection to make sure it was not real. Her hand went through the image, and she withdrew it feeling even more intrigued.

Adamis smiled. There was real sympathy in his expression. *You are watching the reproduction of a scene captured and kept in our archives of knowledge. It is not real, it has already happened. What your eyes are seeing now is what happened at a certain moment and at a certain place.*

She was dumbfounded. “How on earth is that possible?”

Notaplo laughed quietly. *I am sorry, my girl, I cannot explain to you all our technology and knowledge in a single day. I would need hundreds of days… perhaps even thousands… But watch, I think you will find it interesting.*

She gave her whole attention to it. In the image she saw a dozen capsules like the ones they had there. They were set in a circle around a monolith, white as snow. The floor and the walls of this hall were covered with frost. Inside the capsule were slaves. Their eyes were closed, their bodies snow-white. Two Gods appeared on the scene, and she identified Notaplo as one of them. They went to one of the capsules, and after manipulating some sensors they opened it to look at the slave inside.

Kyra stepped forward to see better. Notaplo went to her side and pointed at the two Gods in the image. *It is a laboratory in the House of the Fifth Ring. They have managed to freeze people alive for an indefinite*

period of time. In my last exchange of knowledge with Edru, their First Erudite, I was witness to the existence of several slaves who have been frozen for more than five hundred years, as you can see in the image.

She went on watching. She saw Notaplo close his eyes, and a golden halo completely enveloped the body of the frozen slave.

Using my Power, I searched for the vital essence in one of them, he went on, *and to my great surprise there it was still, hibernating, like a bear waiting to be awakened.*

The scene changed abruptly and showed another, different chamber. In it the bodies of two slaves rested on tables filled with a blue liquid. Two beams of bluish light from the snowy monolith seemed to be controlling the process.

Notaplo cleared his throat. *Edru showed me how they awakened those two slaves who had been frozen for more than a hundred years by using the Power they specialize in: the element of Water.*

The image moved forward in time and showed Kyra the two slaves on their feet, alive. The color of their face and body was now pink, more natural.

Notaplo explained: *Not only did they show no noticeable side effects, they had not aged a single day. And that is a genuine advance. When I was informed, I found it hard to believe. But I was able to confirm it, as you have just seen, and had to accept the evidence.*

Kyra became thoughtful. “That would be almost like being immortal… When you don’t want to grow any older, you only need to be frozen and wake up a thousand years from now. A man might live like this for thousands of years…”

Notaplo raised his eyebrows. *A man… yes you have expressed it very well, my child. And there is the main problem: it does not work the same with us. Unfortunately our Power goes on feeding from our system even in this frozen state. And that is why we still age, although much more slowly, even when frozen.*

“Can’t you somehow shut down your Power, or stop it?”

Adamis sighed and shook his head. *We would die. Our Power is similar to your vital essence: without it we have no life. The body would gradually shut down and die, which is what happens at the end of our existence when it is used up.*

Kyra understood. This revelation seemed deeply important to her. There was a way of killing them… She had to tell Yosane. She would know what else could be deduced from it.

Even so, the advance they have achieved is very significant, even though it fails to reach the desired goal. But they will continue investigating, and if they manage to improve the stage of frozen hibernation they might find the key. There are also many secondary uses. Now we can freeze living creatures indefinitely. Kyra felt like a piece of meat that was about to be frozen. *And it is a good path for study and experimentation in order to attain new goals.*

The scene ended and the beam of light went out. Once again the platform disappeared into the floor.

"Have any other of the Houses made an important advance?" she asked curiously.

The House of the Fourth Ring, basing themselves on their source element, Earth, has achieved something similar. They have managed to turn a living creature into carbon and keep it alive indefinitely by pouring Power into the graphite, which keeps the organism alive.

"Turning a person into a mineral?"

Indeed, child, emulating wise Mother Nature: fossilizing it.

"And… does it work?"

In you it does. In us… unfortunately not.

Kyra narrowed her eyes.

Notaplo smiled. *The path of knowledge is difficult and full of failures. But even from those we can learn, and we gain new and unexpected successes. Sometimes it is the way, not the end, which really matters. One day we will get there, one of the Five Houses will do it. Meanwhile we put to good use all the secondary discoveries we have made, many of them unexpected.*

Let us hope we are the ones, Rotec said with folded arms.

Kyra looked at him, not understanding.

Adamis nodded. *Yes, it would be better if it were us. The House which attains it will make a definitive break in the delicate balance of powers which it is so hard to keep in order to avoid a war. The other Houses will*

want that knowledge for themselves, and there will be war. It is inevitable, for the achievement is of such magnitude that no-one will be able to deny it.

An abysmal war, Notaplo said. *For so great is the glory and power which attaining immortality might grant that the other Houses will not rest until they conquer it. Rivers of pain and death will soak Alantres, our glorious and eternal city. The Five Rings will be drowned in the dark blood of our people. Unfortunately I have not the slightest doubt of that.*

We must move ahead of the others, Rotec said, *especially the House of the Second Ring, for our own good and the good of our whole civilization. If we go to war it could destroy us all.*

Adamis nodded and went to his friend's side. *Lord Asu is extremely dangerous. He is always looking for ways to gain an advantage for his House.*

Rather, for himself, said Rotec. *He is taking advantage of his father's absence. He knows very well that the cycle is about to end and he will once again have to give back the reins of his House to his father, the King.*

Notaplo put his hands behind his back. *Lord Asu is very dangerous, it is true. From what we have been able to find out, his studies are focused on getting hold of the vital essence. But I do not think he has been able to advance very far. That path has been investigated and abandoned by all the Houses.*

All the Erudites are unanimous on that point, it is a dead end, Adamis said.

I would not say that. It is a way from which nobody has managed to obtain more. Dead? I do not know. What we discovered in that field two thousand years ago we are still using nowadays. Let us not forget that. And it is crucial for the survival of our leaders, of our civilization. He was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, which troubled her. She did not understand what they were talking about, although she sensed that it was important and that, for some reason, it affected her.

"What is… this thing that's so important?" she asked timidly.

Notaplo and Rotec looked at Adamis. There was tension on their golden faces.

We cannot tell you all our secrets, Adamis said, hiding behind his God-Prince mask. *You are a slave, after all.*

The comment hurt her, but she said nothing, although her eyes probably gave her feelings away.

But we can share with you the reason why you are here, Adamis said, and gestured at Notaplo to go on.

Notaplo leaned on his staff. He sounded more relaxed. *You are here because you are not like the others, and an anomaly in a species is exactly what I am looking for.*

"Anomaly?"

Well, little shrew, my area of study, my knowledge, centers on the study of the species.

Kyra stared at him blankly. *All my life I have been studying the different varieties of species which wise Nature puts before us in all her greatness and glory, and which we refuse to admire because we believe ourselves to be superior, when in fact we are not.*

"What species?"

All of them, but one in particular.

"Mine."

Notaplo smiled from ear to ear.

Exactly.

"And what interests you about mine?"

For a thousand years we have enslaved your people, and for almost as much time I have been studying you. You have always fascinated me. This innate capacity for survival of a species of animal without Power, which despite everything survives, reproduces and goes on growing. The survival instinct you possess is incredible, something we lack. But the most surprising thing is your extraordinary ability to reproduce.

"Extraordinary? A woman needs more than nine moons to conceive and give birth to a child."

Our race needs ten times as much, and a woman can rarely bear more than two children. Very rarely.

She looked at them in surprise. "You only have one brother or sister?"

They shook their heads sorrowfully. *With luck! We do not have either, we are only children.*

When one of our people dies without children, he said, his eyes on Adamis and Rotec, *it is catastrophic for the family. Not only has one life*

been lost, a life which should have lasted for many years, the seed of the family is also lost and cannot be recovered. That is why attaining immortality is so urgent for us. And that is why I am so fascinated by your species.

"What are you looking for in us?"

Notaplo smiled. *An extraordinary anomaly.*

She frowned. "Why do you want to experiment with me?"

Because you are a Selected, an anomaly in yourself.

"Now?"

At midnight.

Kyra raised herself to her full height.

"I'll be ready."

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It was the middle of the night, and the moon, almost full, shone brightly in a clear sky full of shimmering stars. Liriana surfaced and looked for the safety of the pier. She climbed out noiselessly, dragged herself over the wooden structure and hid among the shadows.

Old Tulmis' plan has worked. I can hardly believe it.

She leaned back and recovered her breath. When she stretched her arms she felt twinges in her tired shoulders. The escape had left her exhausted. Unfortunately she had been forced to leave the stolen boat when she had seen a patrol in the middle of the great channel. She had swum most of the way, the last part under water. She closed her eyes and fell asleep, overcome by exhaustion.

The fluttering of some bird of prey woke her. She sat up, alarmed, her heart racing. She looked in all directions but could see nothing. She was surrounded by darkness.

How long have I slept? She felt recovered. *Not more than a couple of hours. I must hurry or I'll lose the cover of night.*

She recalled Tulmis' instructions: "It's just under the statue of a lion, to the east of the Royal Palace." She had to go there at once. She looked for it, sweeping the horizon with a glance, and it was not hard to find. It was so incredible and magnificent that in the moonlight it shone as if it were pure crystal, The Palace of a God-King. *It's truly spectacular… and the way it shines, even a blind man would be able to know where it is.*

She looked around her and listened in the silence of the night. The area she was in was deserted. There was not a soul near: human, Enforcer or God. She thanked Oxatsi and seized her chance to move as fast as she could without making any noise. It did not take her long to make out the lion statue. She hastened to it, but as she was nearing it she had to stop and hide behind a hedge. A patrol of Custodians was making the round of the area, going around the statue on their way.

She stretched her neck. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to make out the entrance to the twelfth catacomb. It had to be there, but she was too far away to see it. She risked running at a crouch and found a crystal fountain surrounded by glass benches in the middle of the park. She cursed to herself. She could not hide behind them, she would be seen. She ran to the right and found another statue. It too was translucent.

Hell! Everything here is like glass, there's nowhere to hide!

A little to the right she saw some oak trees and ran to them as if a devil were after her. She reached them and threw herself behind one of them, out of sight, with her chest heaving wildly. Only the trees offered any protection in the whole area. She managed to calm down and recover her breath. She glanced quickly around. On the right of the huge pedestal of the statue was a Custodian on watch duty in front of a low rectangular building. This caught her attention. She crawled forward a little further to another tree and hid behind it. She risked a quick look. The low building looked military, with no windows. The door the Custodian was guarding was of reinforced metal, but the bolts were on the outside.

She clenched her fist and nodded. *The twelfth catacomb,* she thought with a triumphant smile. Maruk was inside, a prisoner. She had to rescue him, for herself, for their own people. It was essential. But how? She had to avoid the patrol and the guard at the door. She leaned against the trunk of the tree. And then she heard them. The heavy sound of a dozen iron-clad footsteps, hammering the ground to the rhythm of a drum. Swiftly, like lightning, she looked out and hid back again.

The patrol! It's coming towards me!

Her heart began to beat so hard she thought it might burst from her chest. *What can I do?* If she stayed there she would be discovered, if she ran she would be seen. But she could not stay there; the footsteps sounded very close, were almost on top of her. *I have to go back to another tree!* She crouched, ready to spring.

A barn owl hooted above her. *Damn!* She was so furious that she looked up. And froze. A hand reached out for her from among the shadows of the branches. The patrol was almost on top of her. She did not stop to think twice. She stood, reached up and grabbed the hand. She felt herself being powerfully pulled, and climbed up the tree. She held on to a thick branch and hid. The patrol passed underneath, brushing against the tree on

their way towards the next oak in the park. She breathed again. When they had passed she turned to her savior. Her eyes were met by others both strange and enigmatic: one intense emerald, the other a pale blue, almost gray: eyes she knew very well.

“Ikai!” she cried, unable to contain her surprise and joy.

He put a finger to his lips. “Shhh,” he warned her.

She fixed her eyes on his and made a great effort to contain herself. They waited for the patrol to walk away before speaking.

“But what are you doing here?” he asked in an almost inaudible whisper.

“Me? What are you doing here?”

“What do you think? Hiding from the patrols, of course. The trees are the only place to hide. The whole area’s made of glass.”

“I’m so happy to see you!” she said whole-heartedly. “I was afraid you’d got caught… or worse.” As she looked into the enigmatic Hunter’s eyes and his determined, attractive face, she felt butterflies in her stomach and a pleasant warmth in her chest. “I’m so glad to see you…” she added, and felt the warmth reach her face so that the crimson rose to her cheeks.

And she did not mind.

“You didn’t seem so glad that morning you left without even saying goodbye.”

Liriana read reproach in his eyes. “I didn’t want to endanger your life. You have your mission and I have mine. There were more chances of doing it separately than together. And you know it.”

“You might have asked me.”

“Would you have agreed?”

“No…”

“I didn’t want to risk an argument.”

“But…”

“It’s not important any longer. The two of us made it. We’ve come all this way.”

For a moment he turned a penetrating gaze on her, then he nodded.

“What I’ve come looking for is behind that door. I must get in and rescue him.”

“Rescue? Who?”

“My fiancé.”

Ikai’s face grimaced: his eyes wide, his eyebrows arched, his mouth twisted in surprise. She felt as if she had thrown a bucket of ice at his face. The surprise vanished at once, to be replaced by anger. His eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed and his teeth clenched so hard his jaw seemed about to break. Liriana lowered her eyes and swallowed. A feeling of utter guilt overcame her.

“What happened between us…” she began to say, but he interrupted her at once.

“What’s past is past. There’s no need for an explanation.” His tone was so curt that she felt the pain she had caused as if he had slapped her.

“Let me explain…”

“There’s nothing to explain.”

She looked into his eyes pleadingly, but he turned away. “Thank you… for saving me…”

Ikai replied with a nod. His gaze was lost in the night.

“I must rescue him, he’s deeply important for us… for Gedrel.”

He turned and frowned. “For Gedrel? I thought you were here for yourself.”

“Yes, that too. Well, for both, really.”

“Who are you risking your life for, your fiancé or Gedrel and his lost cause?”

“For him and for the cause. For both.”

He shook his head.

“I know you don’t understand,” Liriana said, looking at him firmly. Her tone showed how offended she was. “I’m not asking you to. Just accept I’m like that,”

“You’re right, forgive me. I’ve no right to judge you.”

She relaxed. She could understand his annoyance, but nobody had the right to judge her convictions or her actions. She was fighting for what she believed to be just, for an ideal, for her people’s freedom, and that was more important than anything, even her own feelings.

“I have to get in there and rescue him. We need him.”

“There’s a Custodian at the door and a patrol doing its round. It’s impossible, you’ll never make it.”

She thought for a moment and realized he was right. But even so, she had to try. “Thank you for everything, Ikai. You’d better go away now…”

“Are you really going to try? Can’t you see you’ll fail?”

“Probably, but I can’t stop now, not when I’ve come this far.”

He seized her shoulders. “It’s insane. Don’t do it.”

She looked into his eyes. “Would you abandon your sister?”

He looked away and withdrew his hands. “No. No, I can’t.”

“Nor can I.”

They were both silent, their gaze blank. There was no way back for either of them.

“Leave, Ikai. I’m asking you. Please”

The silence became unbearable. Ikai looked around. It was clear. He began to climb down. She sighed and let her gaze linger on the huge Custodian. She felt like an ant facing a scorpion. How could a monster like that be defeated? His size was probably matched by his fighting skills. In fact he would not even need to fight; all he needed to do was give the alarm, and everything would be over for her. She breathed out hard. There seemed to be no way out of the situation.

Suddenly she heard the branches cracking and saw Ikai climbing up again.

“All right, so what’s the plan?” he asked with a wink.

She smiled broadly.

As he crawled behind the hedge, Ikai was thinking about their plan. He was not at all sure it would work, but they did not have much choice. Dawn would come in a couple of hours, and they had to get out of there. *I have to help Liriana and move on. Now I know they have Kyra in the Royal Palace I have to get to her somehow.* To get into the castle and rescue her seemed impossible, but he was not giving up, he would do it. He had been forced to withdraw from the immediate surroundings of the Palace. The patrols and the watch being kept were too strict in the higher part, and the risk of being

discovered too high. Back in the lower part he had remained hidden, thinking about how to proceed, in the relative safety of the trees. But Liriana had appeared suddenly, and now he was back in the midst of an extremely dangerous situation.

He shook these thoughts out of his mind and concentrated on the task at hand. He waited in hiding for the eastern patrol to approach. He and Liriana had patiently measured how long it took the patrol to do the round and worked out the best moment to carry out their plan. As the rhythmical heavy tread of the Custodians came closer, his stomach began to churn like butter.

Relax… hold fast… he told himself as the Custodians went by with their martial strides, two feet away from his hiding-place. *It's too dark, they can't see me*, he said to encourage himself, far from sure that this would be true. He breathed deeply and ran behind the chosen oak, the nearest to the guard at the catacomb. He leaned back against the massive hundred-year-old trunk and recovered his breath. He glanced quickly around. There was the Custodian, like an enormous statue of rock in front of the door, holding spear and shield. He calculated the distance: about fifteen paces. He nodded. It was enough. Then he searched for Liriana at the other end of the park. He could not see her, it was too dark. He would have to assume she was in position.

He sighed. Time to act. He put his hands to his mouth and imitated the sound of a heavy grunt in the direction of the Custodian. He waited, then repeated the grunt, this time louder and longer. The Custodian turned his head, and he hid his own behind the tree. It was so dark that at that distance the guard would only be able to see a shadow moving. Ikai repeated his animal grunt, this time loud and sustained. The Custodian turned, breaking his hieratical position. Ikai withdrew his head and hid behind the trunk, letting himself be visible for an instant.

"Who goes there?" came the cavernous voice.

There was silence. He waited, his body flattened behind the tree, completely hidden. He heard the heavy steps moving in his direction. He breathed in deeply and the characteristic sulfur-stench of the Enforcers of the Gods reached him on the night breeze. *He's stopped. But he's there. Damn him, he's hesitating. He'll turn around. I have to lure him towards*

me. He grunted again and poked his head out for the briefest of moments. The steps became faster. *He's coming.*

He took out his throwing dagger. The idea of facing up to the Enforcer crossed his mind, but he dismissed it at once. He would be torn to pieces, and what was worse, the alarm would be sounded. *No, I can't do it by brute force, I have to beat him by cunning.* He ran the dagger along the palm of his hand and made a cut. He opened and closed his hand energetically, so that the blood flowed.

He's here.

On the other side of the park, tense as a Hunter's bow, Liriana watched the scene. The Custodian was nearing the tree Ikai was hiding behind. She took a deep breath and filled her lungs. *Now or never. I only have one chance, and not much of one at that. I have to stake everything on this trick, no matter how little chance there is. I didn't come all this way to be stopped by one last obstacle when I've got success at the tip of my fingers. I'll deal with this last pitfall and free Maruk.*

She summoned up her courage and ran like lightning towards the door, which was now unprotected. She ran as though a great white tiger were at her heels. *Don't let him turn, by Oxatsi our Mother Sea, don't let him turn.* Her fear gave her legs unusual speed. Her heart was in her mouth, and for a moment she nearly choked. She crossed the empty area to the door and reached for the upper bolt. Leaning against the door in an attempt to muffle any telltale sound, she began to slide it with infinite gentleness.

There came the slightest creak.

She turned her head, her heart racing. The Custodian was beside the tree and did not turn. She breathed out heavily, releasing a whirlwind of tension. She reached for the second bolt and carefully pulled it back. This time there was no noise. She turned to look at the Custodian and saw him disappear behind the tree. *Now's the time, let's do it!* She tugged at the heavy door of reinforced iron. Using all the weight of her body she managed to open it wide enough for her to slip her body through. *Here I come! Protect me, Girlai, Father Moon!* She squeezed through the gap into the catacomb.

Ikai was running with all the strength of his legs. He did not dare look back. The next tree was only five paces towards the center. *I have to reach it before the Custodian comes around the oak I've left. If he sees me, we're lost.* He clenched his teeth and ran. He reached the tree and with a swift leap, hid behind it. He was panting as if life was trying to escape from him. He tried to relax, so that the Custodian would not hear him. His lungs were burning and his legs aching from the effort. But the worst thing was his heart. It seemed it was about to burst out of his chest.

He heard a step behind him and a branch cracking.

He's looking for me. Good. I have to distract him, gain time for Liriana. He calmed his breathing and listened hard. He heard another step. Then boots crunching dry leaves.

Hell! He's turning! If he goes back to his post he'll find Liriana!

He looked ahead. The next oak tree was in a straight line, no more than four paces away, surrounded by darkness.

I can do it. I can reach it. I have to risk it or Liriana will be lost. Doubt assailed him. Would the Custodian follow him, or would he return to his post? The most natural thing was for him to turn back, but the Enforcers were supposed to be like bloodhounds: once they smelt blood they did not stop until they found it. He had left his blood on both the oak and the ground on the way to where he was now hiding. Soon he would find out if the rumors were true or not. He waited with his hand still bleeding, so that drops of the liquid of life fell on to the ground beside him. A gust of wind whipped the leaves of the old oak, and the stench of the Enforcer reached his nostrils once again.

Come on! If I can smell you then you can smell my blood, so come on.

The steps sounded again. They were coming in his direction.

He's taken the bait! Ikai shot like an arrow to the oak in front of him. He ran in a straight line so that the girth of the tree behind him would hide him as he escaped. He reached the new tree and was about to turn when his foot hit something hard, he tripped and fell forward. He had not seen the root.

Damn! He'll see me! In pain, he raised his head from the ground. He had to hide behind the oak at once or he would be lost. And from the living gloom, mysteriously, there rose a figure. He watched it, eyes wide. He put his hand to the dagger at his back. A familiar voice greeted him.

"Always in trouble, eh, Hunter?"

Immediately he recognized the almond eyes, black as night, which shone intensely under the jet-black hair in its pony-tail. He saw the sharp face with its small nose, suggestive lips, and the fierceness and strength she always radiated.

"Al… Albana… what…?" he stammered blankly.

She smiled at him roguishly.

Liriana closed the door behind her so as not to raise suspicion either inside or outside the building. *In and out like lightning,* she said to herself, well aware that she only had a few moments before the Custodian returned. She ran down the stone stairs until she reached the inside of the catacomb. It was enormous and shadowy. Two oil lamps, one at the entrance and another at the end of the chamber, was the only light. She could make out hundreds of bodies of slaves, asleep after a hard day's work, completely filling the floor. Very like what she had experienced with Tulmis.

She moved fast, passing over the lying bodies, trying not to tread on anyone and not succeeding, but she did not mind. She had no time to think about it. She did not recognize those faces, in fact she could barely see them. She would have to take the risk. There were too many people there and she had no time.

"Maruk…" she called in a low voice. She strode to the center and called again. Resentful grunts came from the sleepers around her. "Maruk, it's me, Liriana."

"Shhhh," came the reproach from the bodies curled at her feet, so exhausted they did not even want to know what was going on.

"Maruk, where are you?" she asked, this time more loudly.

“Shut up and let us sleep,” said a man in front of her with a thick black beard.

Liriana crouched down beside him “Foreman Sostos’ gang. Where do they sleep?”

The man looked at her angrily. He pointed towards the east of the chamber.

“At that end,” he said hoarsely.

“Let us sleep,” another man grumbled beside her.

Liriana passed over the bodies so fast she tripped and almost fell. She managed to reach the far end. “Maruk…” she called again. She was running out of time, and she knew it. A body stirred and turned.

“Maruk, it’s Liriana. I’ve come for you.”

The man sat up. He was young, thin. His face and dark hair were covered in dirt and he had several days’ worth of unkempt beard on a handsome face. And then Liriana saw a pair of eyes, green as jade, looking at her with the uncertainty of fear and ill-treatment. The young man turned his head in the dark to look at her more closely.

“Liriana? Is it really you… or is this another nightmare this filthy, unbearable place has come up with?”

“Maruk, it’s me!”

The young man looked at her again, incredulously. “It’s you…”

She fell on him and held him tight. “Yes, Maruk, it’s me. You can believe it, it’s not a dream. I’ve come to rescue you.”

Maruk took her cheeks in his hands. With his eyes fixed on hers he kissed her so intensely he left her breathless.

“You’d better hurry,” said an old man sitting against the wall. He pointed to the door.

“Sostos?” she asked.

The old man nodded. Then he looked towards the door.

“Run.”

Liriana and Maruk passed hastily over the slaves and reached the stairs. They ran up them and came to the door.

It’s been quick, straight in and out, she said to herself to give herself courage. The guard might have come back, might be there waiting for her

behind the door. *It was just a moment, just a moment.* She pushed the door gently and peered around.

There was no sign of the Custodian.

Ikai's managed to distract him! She turned to Maruk and signaled to him to come out. She closed the door behind them and slid the bolts back into place so the Custodian would not suspect anything when he came back. Crouching, they began to cross the open area towards the shelter of the nearest oaks. She glanced all round, expecting to see the Custodian at any moment, but the only thing her senses could make out was the gentle sound of the wind on the branches of safety awaiting them. There was not a soul in sight. They were five paces away from the first oak. She looked at Maruk, who was following her with the beginnings of unease in his eyes.

We're going to make it. We're nearly there. And at that very moment a wall of fire rose in front of her.

Taken by surprise, she could barely stop herself in time, and was nearly burnt alive. She took two steps back, away from the roaring flames. She looked at her companion.

"Let's go back," Maruk urged. "This way!"

They turned back and ran towards the east. But another barrier of fire rose before them to block their escape. They retreated. The flames were intense and the heat in the square was scorching.

"What's happening?" she cried. "What's this?" The fiery barriers were a total mystery to her.

Maruk looked around. The flames had now spread to form a circle around them. There was nowhere to go. They had no escape-route.

"It's the Gods… it's the Power of the Gods," he said hopelessly.

In front of the fugitives, behind the flames, there appeared a Golden God. He was immense, like a mountain, a God-Warrior. He wore a tunic of intense red, decorated with vibrant orange. The massive armor he wore was blood-red. After him came a dozen Custodians. The God made a sign with his hand, uttered some words, and the flames died out.

My name is Iradu, the Champion of Lord Asu. In the name of my Lord, God-Prince of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring, you are his prisoners.

The message from the God lashed the two fugitives' minds with such power that their heads were whipped back. They were left stunned, terrified, unable to understand, staring at the imposing figure of the God-Warrior.

The Custodians hastened to surround them. Fear gnawed at her stomach.

Take them away, he ordered. *We must hurry, we are in enemy territory after all.*

So close… she thought, with the sour taste of fear on her tongue.

They were taken to the Second Ring, to the kingdom of fire. The retinue did not stop even for a moment, first on a twin-mast trireme, then on carriages pulled by jet-black coursers, until they reached a magnificent crimson palace. Liriana watched everything around her with anxiety growing in her chest, so she could barely breathe. She thought they would be taken to the dungeons, but instead they were led inside the palace, into a hall as rich and ornamented as it was enormous.

In awe, she watched a fountain in the form of a volcano in the middle of the room. The apex of the fountain exploded, and fire and magma fell on its circular base. The heat of the room was asphyxiating. She passed her forearm along her forehead, which was drenched with perspiration.

"Where are we?" she whispered to Maruk.

"I think it's… the throne hall." He waved his hand towards two elaborate thrones of some exotic reddish wood, ornamented in gold. Behind the seats two giant braziers were burning. The flames were so vivid that the two thrones seemed to burn without being consumed.

The boy's a clever one, came a sarcastic voice into their minds. It sounded cruel.

A slender God appeared, wearing a rich red robe with golden designs, and a breast-plate of orange-red scales. The God stared at them with intense ruby eyes, and Liriana saw a cruelty in them which made her quail. He moved with such haughty dignity that he seemed to be both owner and lord

of the entire Eternal City. After him came Iradu, the God-Warrior who had captured them.

Is it he? the God-Lord asked.

Liriana did not know what was happening. Silence filled the room.

“Yes, my Lord Asu. It is he,” a female voice said.

The voice sounded so familiar that Liriana looked around for it at once. And then she saw her, coming in from an adjacent room.

It was Albana!

Liriana’s eyes opened wide. *Albana! What’s she doing here? What’s going on?*

Are you sure? To me he looks no different from any other flea-bitten slave.

Albana went to Lord Asu, bowed elaborately before the God-Prince and pointed at Maruk.

“It is the one, my Lord. The one you charged me to look for among all the slaves.”

Liriana looked at Maruk, who was as white as a ghost. She was unable to bear the pressure of the situation any longer.

“But what on earth are you doing, Albana?” she asked. “Are you out of your mind?”

Shut up, slave, Iradu ordered her. *The Gods are speaking, and they have not addressed you.*

The mental message hit her mind so hard she felt as if she had been struck on the temple with a hammer. She was stunned.

Thank you, my faithful Iradu. These troublesome ill-smelling slaves never know how to behave before their Gods.

On your knees, slaves, Iradu ordered the two fugitives.

Liriana and Maruk exchanged a look of mingled anxiety and confusion, and knelt.

They all look the same to me, Lord Asu said disdainfully. *But if you assure me this is the one I am looking for… remember what you have at stake, little spy… you know full well the price to be paid if you fail me…*

Albana nodded. “It is, my Lord, this is the one she has come to rescue. This is the final, convincing proof. A little over a year ago I managed to

infiltrate their organization, after many months of hard work earning the trust of one of their leaders. I have been spying on their clandestine group since then. When the rumors of his existence, of what he was able to do, reached me, I tried to locate him as you had ordered, my Lord. I tried to find out who he was, but they kept him well hidden, in secret. When I was close to finding out his identity he disappeared completely, as if the earth had swallowed him. I could not find his trail in the entire Boundary."

Because he had fallen into a quota… Iradu said.

"That is right. The one we had been looking for was taken from the Boundary and brought here, to the Eternal City."

Iradu shook his head. *Sometimes fortune plays tricks on us.*

"I thought I would never find him here," Albana went on. "There are thousands of slaves in the city, and I did not have either his name or his description. But then the plan one of his closest people had made to rescue him reached my ears. So I thought I would offer my services to the leader of the organization and become part of the rescue team. That would lead me to him, and I simply had to ensure she reached here. And that is what I did," she ended, and pointed at Liriana.

When she heard this, Liriana felt as if a mountain of guilt had fallen on her. She had led them to Maruk. In her attempt to save him, to save the Senoca, she had led the Gods to Maruk.

It is very cunning of you to be one of them. I like that, Lord Asu said. He was looking at Albana with a cynical smile.

Albana bowed once again. "Always at my Lord's service."

And the other one? Lord Asu asked with a frown.

Iradu gestured, and from another chamber came two Custodians, dragging Ikai's unconscious body by the ankles.

"You bloody traitor! Why are you doing this to us? Why?" Liriana shouted as Ikai's unconscious body was set down in front of her.

"We each have our own reasons to be here today," Albana replied with perfect calm. "Powerful reasons."

Very well, Lord Asu said, *and now that we have caught these small rodents playing around in our granary I want to know if it is really true.*

"It is, my Lord. The Hunter witnessed it." Albana gestured at Ikai's body on the floor.

Let us question him directly. Tell me slave, is it true, the rumor which has reached my ears, that a slave was able to manipulate the Ring the Gods imposed on him? That he has been able to free other slaves?

The mental message frightened Maruk so badly that all he could do was stare at Lord Asu, wide-eyed.

You see, slave, that would be very undesirable and would go very much against my interests. An enslaved people cannot be liberated. It cannot have hope. It cannot escape from the Boundary, from the control of the Gods, from my control. Such an affront is inconceivable. And more than that: if it were true, it might spread to other races, other groups of slaves. This might have a decidedly negative effect on the perfect system we now enjoy. But such is the rumor which has reached me, and there are certain rumors and their consequences to which I pay a great deal of attention. I shall ask you once more: is it true?

Maruk looked at Liriana, who stared firmly back at him to encourage him not to give in.

I see you need some motivation to make you talk, Lord Asu said, and smiled broadly.

Maruk gave a terrified shrug.

No, it is not you I am going to punish. I need you alive. But not her.

Asu pronounced a single word and twisted his wrist. From his hand there appeared another, a replica of it, in flames. The fiery hand moved to Liriana's arm and closed upon it.

Liriana screamed with pain as the flames of the arcane hand burnt her arm.

"No! Wait! I'll talk!" Maruk cried.

You had better hurry… Lord Asu said. At a command of his index finger the fiery hand began to climb Liriana's arm. The girl screamed in agony and tried unsuccessfully to blow it out. The smell of burning flesh was nauseating.

It will soon reach her neck…

"It's true!" Maruk cried. "I can do it! I can manipulate their Rings so they can escape!"

Lord Asu smiled, and his ruby eyes shone with the intensity of triumph.

That is something I want to see, he said. His face had turned cruel.

He waved his hand, and the fiery hand went out. Liriana fell to the floor, groaning and writhing in pain. Maruk tried to help her.

Tell me, my little spy, do you have the names of the leaders of this little group which seeks rebellion?

Albana nodded.

Lord Asu's face lit up again.

You see, my dear Iradu! This is how to end rebellion before it even starts.

My Lord is a great strategist, Iradu said.

Take them away and lock them up. I have not finished with them yet.

Iradu nodded.

As to you, spy-slave, I am satisfied with your performance. I shall speak to Oskas, my Master-Spy, to let him know.

"My lord Oskas will appreciate the honor. Will I obtain that which I was promised, my Lord?" Albana asked humbly, with her head bowed.

Lord Asu spread his arms and looked up at the sky.

Will I obtain it myself? He said with a cruel smile, and left.

28

It was midnight by the time Kyra was led back to the Chamber of Knowledge by Rotec. The gigantic Warrior walked beside her, looking at her out of the corner of his eye without saying a word. She had the feeling that the Champion was not as much annoyed by her as before, although perhaps she just wished it so. Notaplo and his Erudites received them; Adamis had not yet arrived.

While we wait for my Lord Prince, Notaplo said in a mental message to Kyra, *I have something for you.*

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

Do not worry, little shrew, it is a gift.

Kyra looked into the eyes of the Erudite and saw sincerity in them. Notaplo took her right hand and put a fine gold bracelet with a round silver rune around her wrist. She glanced at the bracelet. It was pretty, but she did not understand the reason for the gift.

I hope you like it. It serves a double purpose: on the one hand, decorative (he smiled), *and on the other to aid communication. It is a communicator which will allow you to listen to us without our needing to communicate directly with you. You will be able to hear our conversations as if you were one of our own.*

"Thank you, it's pretty…"

And now, if there is anything bothering you, I shall try to ease your mind.

"Thank you," she said again, and bowed to him.

What is on your mind?

"I still don't understand what you're looking for in us. Why do you study us?"

Initially I was looking for a way to improve our fertility, which as I told you before is a terrible problem for our civilization. Later on an insane idea came to me, which drove me to search for a way of lengthening our

existence. I studied and experimented without pause for more than six hundred years.

At that moment Adamis arrived, and all greeted him with respect. Kyra studied him. She did not want to stare at him, but for some reason she could not help herself. It was as if the slender Prince attracted her attention with his magnetism every time they were close to each other. Adamis gazed at her kindly, and she had to look away.

What's the matter with me? Why do I behave like this every time I see him? I must calm down, focus. But deep inside her a sweet, pleasant excitement disturbed her calm.

Notaplo went on: *But every time I was close to discovering something important, it slipped through my fingers. I was on the point of abandoning it all, even of putting an end to my own existence, as I had devoted all my life to the study and achieved nothing that could help our civilization. And then one day, quite unexpectedly, the answer I had been looking for presented itself, literally, at my door.*

Notaplo turned and looked towards the far end of the chamber. *Arga, come here, please.*

A figure made its way between the pods at the far end. It was a woman, very beautiful. She wore a simple white robe embroidered in black. Her arms were bare, and on her left arm Kyra saw the Ring which marked her as a slave. She came over to them and greeted the Gods with a deep bow. Adamis smiled at her, and Kyra noticed a certain knowingness in their looks. When she saw this, she felt an emptiness at the pit of her stomach, and was upset without knowing why.

Arga looked at Notaplo. "Did you call, Lord?"

Yes, my dear, I need your assistance for a moment, Notaplo said and turned to Kyra. *Arga has been in my care for some time. And Arga is special… very special…*

Adamis gazed at the beautiful slave with a faint smile on his lips.

"How special?" Kyra asked in annoyance.

How old would you say she is?

Kyra examined the woman's angular features, smooth skin, green eyes and jet-black hair, trying not only to gauge her age but also the reason for Adamis' pleasure. She was a very beautiful woman, it had to be admitted.

“Around twenty-five?” she said after thinking about it.

Adamis smiled, and his golden face lit up. Notaplo smiled too and nodded several times.

Yes, around twenty-five, would you say? Notaplo smiled again. *Tell her your real age. Speak freely*.

The woman gave a slight nod. “I carry forty-eight springs on my back.”

“Forty-eight? But that’s impossible!” Kyra exclaimed incredulously. She folded her arms. “But she doesn’t have a single wrinkle or grey hair. Nothing…”

Notaplo looked closely at Arga’s face.

True, very true, and that is precisely why she is a very special woman.

How long have you been with us?

“Since you took me in, Lord, when I was eighteen years old.”

Yes… it seems like yesterday when I rescued you… but time has passed, and we have discovered and learnt much in this time. Much, and all of it of importance…

Kyra was puzzled by the comment. “Rescued? She’s a slave. She must have been brought here like me, against her will.”

“The Lord saved me from being executed,” Arga said, sounding grateful.

You see, Kyra, Arga was not born on the continent. She was born here, in our city.

Kyra strained her neck. “She’s the daughter of slaves who I guess must have been here their whole life. I understand.”

Although it is true that hundreds of slaves are born here, in captivity, that is not exactly her case… Arga is the daughter of a slave and… one of ours.

Kyra was stunned. The thought had not even crossed her mind. The daughter of a God and a slave woman?

“Is… is that even possible?” she said unsurely. She could not make sense of the idea, and above all of the repercussions.

Notaplo’s face shadowed. *It is. Physiologically, at least. It is very rare, but on a few occasions it has occurred. Morally and legally it should not happen. It is not accepted among our own people, far from it… For the*

Lords it is a real sacrilege to beget a hybrid child, and for the Priests it is an abomination to be exterminated.

It is forbidden by law, Rotec said severely. *It is a serious crime. The punishment for it is death: death of both mother and child.*

Kyra could not believe what she was hearing. Those egotistic and utterly despotic beings not only enslaved humanity but believed themselves to have the right to take slave women and then kill those of them who got pregnant! For the mere fact of giving birth! Her fighting soul was crying out for a knife. She turned a furious glare at Adamis.

The God-Prince instantly caught the overwhelming rage and contempt in her eyes, and looked down. She saw in him the shadow of shame, the acknowledgement of the infamy which had been committed. She clenched her fists, filled with burning anger, but made such an effort to bite her tongue that she thought her veins would explode.

Notaplo seemed to notice the rage she was holding under control, for his face darkened. *I understand how you feel, little one. Personally I do not share that view, nor do I defend it. But the law must be followed, or else our civilization would collapse. Balance must be kept, at any cost. Arga is a rare exception.* He smiled at her. *Very few like her are conceived, and even fewer survive. The existence of harems in the noble houses is no secret, nor is what happens there…*

Although it is an insufferable shame which stains our honor, Rotec said, his face twisted in disapproval.

Adamis nodded. *It is, but the law does not punish it. The Five Kings do not condemn it. Perhaps in the next Ruling Cycle… although I do not believe it. The Kings cannot afford enmity with the Lords; when all is said and done, they need them to sustain the Houses. They would not forbid the Lords their lusts and minor misdemeanors. It is the price that has to be paid in order to keep them happy and maintain a strong, cohesive House.*

Kyra did not understand this. Who were the Five Kings? Where were they? Were they not reigning at that moment? Adamis ruled his Kingdom, as she knew, but since when? Why? And for how much longer? Too many questions without an answer.

Notaplo sighed deeply. *Politics is a dangerous animal I have never wished to dally with. I have always preferred science and study. And this pursuit of what slips between our fingers, the passing of time, is what has*

led me to beings like Arga, who are not an abomination, but quite the reverse. They are exceptional, for in them the passing of time has slowed down. And that deceleration is completely natural, since they do not possess any Power at all. Their human origin dominates, refusing to inherit the Power which only we possess. So I have been studying Arga, as in her lies part of the answer I need. Her body naturally slows down the ravages of time. If I could transfer that to our own bodies, we might be able to live two or three millennia. It would be an epoch-making moment for our civilization. And the key lies in her.

Kyra watched Arga with new eyes. She was human and God at the same time.

The moment has come for our little experiment, Notaplo said with a jovial smile. He led the way, leaning on his staff, until he reached the three pods at the far end of the chamber.

Bring the specimen.

One of his helpers left the chamber and came back a moment later with a slave, his head bowed. Kyra looked at him closely, deeply intrigued. She recognized him. It was the slave Adamis had bought at the market. The one he had said was *very special*.

Name, Notaplo said.

The slave raised his head for a moment.

“Marcus,” he whispered.

Age.

There was a silence, and they all looked at the slave.

Rotec pressed him further. *Age, slave,* he repeated.

“Seventy,” replied Marcus, looking down at the floor.

Kyra had estimated his age as about that, and she smiled. She had a good eye for that kind of thing. Arga had put her off her course.

Notaplo went to his side.

I need to know your real age, not the one you make your masters believe. I know your secret. That is why you are here today. There is no need for you to lie.

Fear began to show on Marcus’ face.

Do not be afraid and tell me your true age.

The slave threw a frightened glance at Notaplo, then nodded.

“I understand, my Lord. My true age… is three hundred and ten.”

Kyra was in shock. Three hundred and ten! He should have been dead and buried, and yet there he was, looking healthy. Old, but healthy.

One of the helpers went over to the monolith and did something to it with his hands.

Notaplo watched the slave closely. *There is something else you are hiding, is that not so, Marcus? You have done very well; you have been hiding for many years among the slaves without attracting attention. But we have found you, for what you hide cannot be hidden from one who looks determinedly, and believe me, I have been looking for it for a whole eternity.* He was gazing at the monolith as he spoke.

He lifted his staff and banged it down on the floor. His helper caught the gesture and interacted with the monolith. There was a powerful golden flash, and a beam of silver light from the artifact swept over Marcus from head to toe. Kyra felt gooseflesh all over. She looked at Marcus and saw his hands holding his chest, where a revealing white gleam shone intensely. His wrinkled face was sunk in fear and despair.

Is it he? Adamis asked Notaplo.

Yes, my prince, it is he. You have found him. An extraordinary anomaly.

Kyra was staring at the poor slave, not understanding. Why was he an extraordinary anomaly?

Never fear, Marcus. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. I have been looking for a long time for an anomaly as extraordinary as you. I will not let anything happen to you. I must study you, experiment, learn! The possibilities are unbelievable! He was excited.

This surprised Kyra, whose face twisted.

Show me, Notaplo said.

Marcus looked at him with terror in his eyes.

“I… don’t…” he muttered, shaking his head.

At once Rotec drew his weapon and stepped forward.

You have been given an order, slave, he said. His energy was so intimidating that the chamber itself appeared to shrink.

Terrified, Marcus began to weep.

Do not worry, you have nothing to fear. Just show me, the Erudite said in a friendly voice.

Trembling, Marcus fell on his knees.

“I… never… I don’t know…” the slave stammered.

Do not worry. I know you do not understand it, and I assure you that you are not guilty of being who you are. Of being what you are.

There was a long silence, and Marcus stopped whimpering. Looking directly at Notaplo, he raised his hand and showed him his palm. The slave closed his eyes and appeared to concentrate. Suddenly he opened his eyes, and on the palm of his hand there appeared a burning flame.

Kyra was spellbound. The slave had used Power!

Rotec was rooted to the spot. *It cannot be! What kind of outrage is this?* he said in complete bafflement.

Notaplo looked at Adamis. *We found it, my Lord Prince!*

Adamis nodded and smiled. *At last, an extraordinary anomaly! A hybrid with Power?* Notaplo was quite beside himself.

Marcus closed his fingers, and the flame went out.

This is a crucial moment for my studies. At last I shall be able to discover what I could not find in Arga: the key component that might be transferred to our people. Not only has the passing of time slowed down in Marcus, he also has Power. This validates the assumption that they are compatible: natural slowing down and coexistence with the Power. We are very close to an unequalled discovery, very close to a giant step forward for our civilization. I must go on at once with the investigation. I will free us from the ageing process, I will accomplish it! We will be an immortal civilization!

Kyra understood the enormous importance of what had excited the Erudite so much. But if he were to manage it, the whole of humanity would be doomed. The Gods would be practically immortal, with all their great Power and longevity. Men would be finished. There would be no hope.

Come, we must continue! Notaplo said. Quickly he went to examine the pods.

With the help of his disciples he calibrated them, manipulating levers and activating runes of Power which were beyond Kyra’s understanding. When they had finished preparing the vessels they went back to the monolith. One of the assistants held Notaplo’s staff while he placed both

hands on the polished, transparent surface. Two golden circles began to rotate around them.

The Erudite closed his eyes and began to interact with the powerful object of knowledge. A buzzing reached Kyra's ears, and she felt suddenly dizzy. Golden flashes came out of the monolith from different heights at sporadic intervals, as if they were dancing to an unknown melody. Incomprehensible runes slid all over the four surfaces of the monolith, chasing each other from the top to the base, disappearing and being replaced by others going in the opposite direction.

Kyra watched the incredible spectacle with awe and growing concern. The more she discovered about these beings, the more powerful and intelligent she found them. This was a very bad omen. Managing to escape alive from that universe was becoming less and less likely, all-but-impossible.

Notaplo made a sign with his staff, and at once they put Marcus into the central pod and closed the door. Then the Erudite turned to Arga, who nodded. Accompanied by one of the scholars, Arga went into the pod on the left. She seemed calm and relaxed, even when the crystal cover was closed on her. The scholar made a sign to Kyra to go into the pod on the right. She hesitated. With her heart beating wildly, she glanced at Adamis. The God-Prince gave her the slightest nod.

What you are going to experience, child, will feel very unpleasant, Notaplo warned her. *It is quite possible that it will have a negative impact on your person… one which may be hard to forget…*

"Don't worry about me, I'll handle it," Kyra said, although doubts were beginning to work on her stomach until she almost felt like throwing up.

Notaplo nodded. *All right.*

Kyra took a deep breath, summoned up all her courage, and entered the pod.

Notaplo's three helpers took up their positions, one beside each pod. They operated the controls, and the inside began to fill with an ethereal substance, like a strange mist which instead of being damp was dry, rough. She began to feel uneasy, and fear crawled up her chest like sharp claws. Suddenly she felt two stings, one in each shoulder. She turned her head, and with horror saw that two silver rods were stuck in her flesh. She tried to free

herself, but realized her whole body was paralyzed from the neck down. She wanted to scream with panic when she saw Notaplo and Adamis watching her through the glass. *Huh! I won't give you that satisfaction! I won't scream!*

A new substance, this time red, began to fill the pod, and she tried to calm her unease. From the front of the pod she watched a black tube moving towards the monolith. She turned her head and saw part of two other identical tubes coming from the other two pods. She began to feel weak. A light ran up and then down her body, analyzing her. She heard a hollow sound at her feet and suddenly, as if it had been sucked, all the ethereal substance enveloping her went out through the tube towards the monolith. The rods disappeared, and a dribble of blood ran down her arms. The cover of the pod opened with a clang.

Kyra looked at the monolith. The artifact showed a variety of strange runes before it settled on a round one with a dot in the middle. Then Arga's pod opened. New runes appeared on the surface of the monolith, this time it was rectangular with an X-shaped figure in the center. Kyra raised her head to look at Marcus' pod, waiting for it to open. She wanted to see what rune appeared on the artifact. The runes ran across the mystical object and then showed the same round one with a dot in the middle of it. Kyra shivered and stiffened. *This can't be good*, she thought, shaking her head.

Help them, Notaplo said, and they were immediately attended to by the scholars.

They were laid on tables which radiated a pleasant heat, and she felt it comforting her. She allowed the feeling to engulf her, and regained her strength. She felt so well, so comfortable, that her mind became drowsy. But she resisted it. *No, I'm not going to sleep now. I want to know what it all means.* She pushed herself up and sat on the table with her legs dangling.

Rest, child, you need it, Notaplo said.

"I'll rest later. What does this experiment mean? Why do Marcus and I have the same rune?"

Heed Notaplo, Adamis insisted. *You need rest,*

"Answer me, then I'll rest."

Notaplo shook his head.

Very well, I will tell you. The reason why you have been catalogued with the same rune is one that escapes my understanding and at the same time is extremely important. In fact, the repercussions are enormous. Marcus and you are the same type of hybrid.

Kyra was stunned. Her mind could not take what he meant. She was no hybrid!

"That's absolutely impossible! I can't be like him!

Adamis stepped forward, looking upset.

Are you sure, Notaplo?

I am indeed. There can be no other explanation. That is what the results of the analysis indicate.

Might it be related to the fact that she is a Selected?

I do not know, your Highness. I would need to study her in depth. I cannot venture a reason without a thorough previous study.

That cannot be, and you know it. Her destiny is already written.

Interfering with a Selected is punishable by death, Rotec warned them.

She looked at the three Gods in turn. "What's my destiny? What's going to happen to me?"

Adamis sighed deeply. His eyes turned dull, revealing sadness. She had not expected this, and it frightened her.

Your destiny… is… the Prince began remorsefully, in *three days, at the moment of the Full Moon, you will be delivered for the Ceremony of Vivification.*

Kyra stared hard at him. "Will I survive?"

Adamis averted his eyes and looked at the floor.

No, you will not survive.

29

“Ikai, wake up!”

Liriana’s voice was coming to him from some faraway place, like a ghost, except that it was painful.

“Come on, wake up. Come back.”

He felt himself being shaken, but no matter how much he wanted he could not go back to Liriana’s warm arms. He recalled the night they had shared and the feelings it had awakened in him. He wanted to go back to her, see her, touch her, kiss her…

And Albana’s face appeared before him, filling his mind. He opened his eyes wide and sat up like a spring.

“Albana! Treason!” he cried. He had no idea where he was.

Hands grasped him by the shoulders. “Take it easy, Ikai, you’re with me. It’s Liriana.”

Ikai looked around, trying to orient himself. “Be careful! Albana’s sold us out!”

Liriana’s face shadowed. She averted her gaze and nodded slowly. “I know, Ikai. We’re prisoners.”

He could make out a barred window, the rock wall and the metal door, and understood. He felt anguish hollowing out his chest. Prisoners! Liriana gazed at him, her turquoise eyes filled with sadness. As he looked at the brave soldier’s face, delicate and large-eyed, his soul began to unwind. He reached out his hand and touched her hair, so short and strong it scratched his fingers. She smiled faintly.

Suddenly he noticed a movement at the far end of the dungeon, among the shadows, and saw a man. He stood up, alert, with his fists clenched.

“It’s Maruk. He’s with us. Easy.”

“I don’t know him.”

“He’s the one I came looking for.”

Ikai looked at Liriana, then at the young man who had got to his feet. The light of the full moon, coming in through the window, fell on Maruk. Ikai noticed that under all the dirt and grime he was an attractive young man, with green eyes. He felt something strange within himself, something he had never felt before. He did not want this man to be there, he wanted him to disappear immediately, and a darkness came over his spirit. He felt rage.

“I see,” he said in what was almost a grunt.

“He’s with me,” Liriana said sweetly, giving Maruk a tender smile which Ikai realized meant in *every way*.

He clenched his jaw. He did not like it, did not like it one little bit. But there was nothing he could do about it, no matter how angry he felt. It was Liriana’s choice, so he had better calm down. He breathed deeply, in and out, a couple of times. He felt a little better, although not much. He noticed that her right arm was bandaged.

“Did they wound you?” he asked, suddenly concerned.

“It’s better now. They dressed it before they put us in here. It just needs to heal. For some reason they want us alive.”

“What happened? How did we get to this cell? Where are we?”

“I’d better tell you what happened. You’ve been out for hours.”

She told him everything, without overlooking a single detail. As he listened to her he could not help but feel doubly betrayed, but he had to stay calm and concentrate on what really mattered: to escape from there and save Kyra. He was still alive, and as long as there was life there was hope. It was madness to confront the Gods and he knew it, but that was what he would do if he had to. Liriana finished her tale and watched his reaction.

“I never trusted her,” Ikai said. “She wasn’t straight. If I ever cross paths with her again… I’ll kill her without so much as a word.”

“She fooled us both. I still can’t believe she was working for that God-Prince. I thought she was a fellow-rebel, a friend…” Liriana was obviously distressed.

Ikai glanced at his Ring. He gestured toward Maruk. “Can he really free me?”

She nodded. “Yes. That’s why the Gods are looking for him.”

Ikai turned to him. “Can you free us all, all the Senoca?”

Maruk sighed. “Yes. I found out how to do it. I’ve only managed with a few —it doesn’t always work, and you need a lot of time. Quite honestly it’s not at all easy, but it can be done, theoretically”

“Do you see his importance now, Ikai?” Liriana interrupted. “Maruk is the key that can free us all! So that the Senoca may be free again!”

“Even if he takes off our Rings we won’t be free. We still won’t be able to escape the Boundary.”

Maruk smiled.

“It’s not that I can free us from the Rings,” he said, glancing down at his own, “but I can manipulate them. We can all cross the Boundary and run away. The Rings will stop working properly.”

Ikai stared at him in awe. “You’d better not lie to me,” he said threateningly. He was not going to be taken in again.

Maruk gazed back at him calmly. “I’m not lying. There are people who’ve managed to escape and cross the Boundary with manipulated Rings. You’re a Hunter, so you know that…”

Ikai remembered the day he had been wounded by the beast outside the Boundary, and the group which had managed to cross.

“Do you understand now how crucial Maruk is for our cause? How important he is for Gedrel?”

Ikai nodded slowly.

“If he can free us from the Rings there’ll be hope. The Senoca will be able to escape from the yoke of the Gods, they’ll be able to go back home, to Mother Sea. It’ll mean a new beginning for our people.”

“The Gods won’t allow it. They’ll go after you and kill you.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. We must save Maruk, take him back to our people. Gedrel’s waiting for him. He has great plans.”

“I’m here for my sister, not for him, not for your revolt.”

“Yes, but now we’re together in this dungeon, and the three of us have the same goal: to get out of here.”

Ikai went over to the window and looked at the moon. That night it would be full. It was turning red.

“We’re going to have a Red Moon,” he said.

Maruk shook his head. “Bad omen,” he said. Ikai became aware that his rival had a soft voice, almost melodious.

“I don’t believe in those things,” he said. “They’re just old superstitions,”

“The old beliefs say that Girlai, Father Moon, turns red with rage when he can no longer bear the separation from his beloved Mother Sea,” Liriana explained.

“Many and powerful are the ancient beliefs of our people,” Maruk said.

“My only belief is that we have to get out of here before they kill us. Let’s concentrate on that.” Ikai studied the cell. His decision to help Liriana had led him to this critical situation. He did not blame her; the decision had been his own, and he would have to bear the consequences of his acts. Rescuing Kyra might had been suicide before, but now, locked up in there, it seemed to him it would be impossible.

“I won’t give up, no matter how impossible it might seem. I’ll go on.”

Albana arrived at the Black Tower. She greeted the guards with a bow and showed them the disc she carried on a chain around her neck.

“Are you a Shadow?”

Albana nodded.

“Master Oskas awaits me.”

When he heard the name of the Master Spy, the Enforcer of the Gods tensed.

“You may go in.”

Albana entered the tower. In the eyes of everyone else she was only another servant. She was dressed as a slave of the Second Ring, and her symbol was that of a peasant. There was nothing to distinguish her from any other slave, nothing except the disc which hung around her neck. Discretion and the ability to blend in among the slaves were essential in her work.

She ran up the spiral staircase to the top. The tower of Oskas, Lord Asu’s Master Spy, rose at the back of the great palace like a chimney of black rock where the ruthless plans of the God-Prince of fire were purged.

Albana’s spirit was as gloomy as the place she was entering. The betrayal she had had to make gnawed at her insides, and she felt as though an iron fist were strangling her soul. *You knew the moment would come,*

sooner or later. You always knew, she reminded herself. And she had known, but deep inside she had wished it would not need to happen, at least not in the way she had done it. *I knew I'd have to give up Maruk, but I was hoping Liriana would be spared, even though the chances of that were always pretty remote.* What she had not counted on, and what had finally enraged her, had been Ikai's intervention.

She sighed. Now she would not only have the deaths of Maruk and Liriana on her conscience but that of Ikai as well. The first two had earned their fate. *Whoever dares defy the Gods finds only death as a reward. A death steeped in suffering.* But Ikai did not deserve to die like that. He had not defied the Gods, he only wanted to save his sister. Even so, coming to the Eternal City was suicide, and from that first moment the Hunter knew he was doomed to fail and die. *They gambled and lost. That's the game of life,* she told herself to quiet the inner voice which reminded her, bitingly, that she had betrayed her friends.

I have no friends. I'm a survivor, and survivors can't afford that luxury.

She walked into the chamber she knew so well, where she had spent countless hours during those last few years being trained as a spy in the service of Oskas. Inside the circle of suffering, her Master was practicing unarmed combat with four of his disciples. Albana recognized Lisnan, with his unmistakable red skin, the moment he launched a kick in mid-flight towards his Master's head. Oskas deflected the leg with his forearm and punched Lisnan in the lower belly. He was thrown outside the fighting circle, where he lay on the floor fighting for breath.

Albana's gaze was held by her Master. She was always impressed by his imposing physique and capacity for fighting. He was as tall as a God-Warrior, although Oskas was simply a hybrid born in the Eternal City, just like her, just like the four disciples. But there was something else in her Master; he had evolved into something more sinister and powerful. And both of them, she and Oskas, kept a secret, one of vital importance: both of them, unlike the rest of the hybrids, were *exceptional*, a singularity which only occurred very occasionally. Only a handful of such cases were known. That was the reason why Oskas had sought her out and recruited her. She and her Master were different from the other hybrids because they both possessed something very dangerous: they had Power, the Power of the Gods. They could never reveal this secret, for it would lead them to death.

The Houses would never accept such an aberration, and if one of them did so, it would be in order to experiment. That was exactly what Albana suspected had happened with her Master. Moltus, that crazy Erudite, had experimented with Oskas, turning him into the monster, half-hybrid and half-Enforcer, which he now was. By the grace of Father Moon, that had not happened to her, and she would do everything in her power to avoid it.

Oskas spun with the speed and agility of a black panther to block the attack of Olsol, the hybrid from the North, blond and pale as the snow. Oskas' body reacted. The wide shoulders squared, the narrow waist turned and two well-exercised arms hit Olsol's face with hard precision. The Master wore a reinforced cuirass and black pants. His uncovered arms were ochre, with swollen veins, like those of the Enforcers yet different. The ochre was reddish, just like the blood which ran through his veins. *He's still human,* Albana reminded herself. She did not know what the Gods had done to her Master before she was selected to enter his service, but he seemed to have one foot in the world of the Enforcers and the other in that of the humans. What she was sure of was that the process must have meant a great suffering; it hurt her just to look at it.

With movements which neared perfection, Oskas inflicted severe pain and defeat on his pupils. The four ended up outside the circle, unable to go on, their bodies defeated. With a great effort they struggled to recover and knelt, resting their hands on their thighs and watching their master with their heads bowed.

"Welcome, young Shadow," Oskas greeted her from the center of the circle with his hands behind his back. The voice sounded worn-out, as always beneath the Helmet he wore.

"Master," said Albana, and bowed respectfully.

"Come into the circle, come closer."

Albana obeyed, as she always did to any request of her Master, without hesitation.

"Our powerful Lord Asu, in person, has congratulated me on the success of the mission. That's something which doesn't happen very often."

"The Lord honors me."

"You honor the Shadows with your skill."

"Thank you, Master, I live to serve you."

Albana bowed to her Lord once again and stared at the Helmet of Void Oskas always wore. It covered his whole head. The back of the helmet was black as night, while the front was an oval mirror which covered his whole face. When you looked into this mirror it swallowed your soul and reflected no image back. Albana always felt a chill run down her back when she looked at herself in her Master's face. And that day was no different.

"You've always been a gifted student. If anyone could carry out the mission with guaranteed success, you're the one."

"Nestas is a better fighter than I am. He always beats me," Albana said, looking at the ebony-skinned disciple.

"Nestas is stronger and better in combat than you, that's true, but don't forget that the most powerful weapon we Shadows have is not the body, but the mind. In that, you're superior to them all." He waved his hand at the four men.

Albana bowed in silence.

"The success of your mission is good proof of that. We have obtained our Lord Asu's favor, and that's a very difficult thing to obtain. His wishes are always demanding in the extreme, and he knows no pity…" Oskas waved his hand and the disciples stood up.

Albana straightened.

"Who are you?" the Master asked his pupils.

"The Shadows!" they answered in unison.

"To whom do you owe loyalty?"

"Master Oskas!"

"Who do we serve?"

"The House of Aureb!"

"Always remember, the Shadows are nothing but slaves in the eyes of the Gods. Don't you ever forget that, my pupils. The Enforcers won't get in our way, since we work for their masters and they know it. But guard yourselves against the Gods, or else your lives will go out in the snap of a finger."

"Yes, Master!" the five replied.

Albana caught the veiled warning.

My request to Lord Asu…

Oskas shone, radiating blackness, and a shadow swallowed him up. He disappeared.

She blinked in surprise. In the time it took her to do that, the shadow moved and appeared before her, covering the space which separated them. Oskas' arm came out of the mist, seized her neck and lifted her off the floor as if she were a rag doll. The rest of his powerful ochre-red body came out of the shadow as this vanished.

"A slave can ask nothing of her Master," he said sternly. "Still less of the God whom her Master serves. It's an unthinkable outrage, something which deserves to be punished with death."

"I'm sorry, Master…" Albana said breathlessly.

"You've endangered not only your life, but mine, and that of all," he said, waving his hand at the other four pupils.

"I only wanted…" she managed to mumble. But she had no air left to breathe with.

"It doesn't matter what you wanted. We serve the Gods. That is our reason for being, our reason for existence. We do their will, we question nothing and we ask for nothing in return, except to live one more day in the service of our masters."

Albana bent her head, unable to breathe. She was suffocating. She kicked instinctively in the air, but Oskas did not slacken his pressure on her neck and kept her two hand-spans off the floor.

"Nod if you understand this lesson of life, Shadow."

On the point of asphyxiation, she nodded as best she could.

The Master Spy let her go, and she fell to the floor. She tried to breathe and was overcome by a spasm.

Ignoring her, he turned to his pupils. "You must never forget that the Shadows are not the only agents serving the Gods. The Five Houses have spies at their disposal: among the slaves, among the Enforcers, even among the Gods themselves. There is a lot at stake, and the risks are very high in the game of power in the Eternal City. Tonight, at midnight, it will be full moon. The Ceremony of Vivification will take place at the great temple, and the most powerful Gods of the Five Houses will be present. Go back to the night, melt into the shadows and become my eyes and ears. It's a very important night, one when the power of the Houses might become

unbalanced. Lord Asu charges us to be alert and inform him of any stir of suspicious power among his rivals."

"Yes, Master," the four said, and after a solemn bow they left the hall.

Albana, still lying there on the floor unable to recover, was trying the get the air to reach her lungs.

"What is the first law of the Shadows?" Oskas asked her. His tired voice echoed beneath his sinister helmet.

"We serve the House of Aureb."

"What is the second law?"

"We serve in secret."

"What is the third law?"

"The past does not exist."

He nodded slowly.

"Remember the laws of the Shadow well, or you won't live to see another full moon."

"I… I will, master."

Oskas put his hand under his cuirass and brought out a disc with a great golden nugget in the center. He held it in his gloved hand and showed it to her. He spoke a few words, and the disc rose to hover above his open hand.

"Watch and learn, young Shadow, so that this lesson may be engraved on your memory."

The disc began to rotate, and a beam of light shot out from it. Before Albana a scene was projected. She recognized Lord Asu, with beside him Moltus, his old Erudite. She felt a chill at seeing the mad scientist, and shivered.

At last the slave who managed to neutralize the Rings is in my power. I have been searching for him for a long time, and patience is not exactly one of my virtues.

The voices say it is highly unlikely that a slave would be able to do anything of the sort.

You and your damned voices! That is precisely why I have captured him. I want to find out whether it is really possible.

Leave him to me, I will find out, my Lord, do not worry. Moltus gave a sarcastic giggle.

Be careful with your damned experiments. I do not want him to die until I know whether it is true or not. Where there is one, there will surely be more. I must know if he is really capable of it. My other Erudites say it is not possible for a slave to have managed it.

You have come to the right Erudite. You will know, my Lord, you will know with absolute certainty before he dies. Leave it to me.

Do it tonight, while the Ceremony of Vivification is taking place. Today is a very important day. One cycle closes and another commences. Let us begin it with good news.

Indeed, my Lord.

And by the fire of the heavens! Do not let the screams of the slave reach the great temple.

Moltus gave a halting giggle. Of course not, my lord.

He shall be brought to you on the brink of midnight.

The voices want to know whether we should look into the slave's reward.

Reward?

The spy begged my Lord to save her sick mother's life if she managed to complete her mission. My Lord accepted the deal…

Lord Asu laughed cruelly. *Save the life of an old slave? What we ought to do is throw her into the well of magma. Oskas will have to answer to me for his spy's insolence. If he does not know how to control his flock, I shall teach him how to do it.*

A ball of fire emerged from the God's hand, and he hurled it against one of the two chamber servants. The slave died amid screams of agony, his body consumed by flames.

A dirty slave dares propose a deal to me? To a God? To me? She is lucky that illness is going to kill her mother, or else I would kill her myself. If that dirty spy dares address me again, I'll burn her to a crisp.

Moltus watched the scene impassively. *Your patience is great, my Lord.*

If it were up to me I would have all the elderly and sick killed. We are too benevolent with those cockroaches. Unfortunately the Council does not approve of this. According to the Five it would be both counterproductive

and a blow to the economy. But the day will come when I will no longer need to follow the laws of the Council, and the Five will kneel before me. When that day comes, nothing will save the slaves. I will do with them as I please.

Moltus laughed softly. *It will come, my Lord, and soon, the voices tell me. Never fear, my Lord, it will be done according to your orders.*

The disc stopped spinning in Oskas' hand, and the image disappeared. And with it, hope vanished from Albana's heart. Her mother was dying, and without the intervention of the Gods she would not survive. The pain she felt in her chest was so sharp she thought her heart was being drawn with hot tweezers.

"Serve the Gods or die, young Shadow. There's no other way, there's no other reward. Stay alive. There's nothing more you can aspire to."

"Why do you show me this, my Lord?"

"My reasons are my own. You don't need to know them."

Albana bent her head.

"You shouldn't have gone to Lord Asu. You shouldn't have believed that I wouldn't find out. I'm Oskas, Master-Spy, Leader of the Shadows. I know everything that happens around me. Don't forget that again, or it will cost you your life."

Albana nodded slowly, defeated.

"Go now, before I regret it and end your existence."

Without hope, beaten, she left the Black Tower and vanished into the night. She reached the seventh catacomb, where her dying mother was kept. She identified herself to the Custodian who stopped her at the door, and was admitted. She passed between the slaves until she reached the far end, where Foreman Gosner was sitting beside the fire. He greeted her with a brief nod of acknowledgment, looking deeply worried.

"Welcome," he said.

"How is she?"

Gosner shook his head. "I've done all I could for her, as you asked, but she's gotten worse these last few days. I don't think she'll make it through the night. She's been asking for you."

To Albana the news came as though he had poured boiling water over her.

“I’m truly sorry. Nabala is a great woman. She’s well-loved in this place where the love of Mother Sea and Father Moon don’t reach us.”

She swallowed with difficulty. She held back the tears which were already running down her cheeks and steeled herself.

“Thank you, Gosner. I won’t forget it.”

The Foreman nodded and waved her to go to her mother. Albana knelt beside her and smiled gratefully at the woman who was tending to her. The woman nodded silently and withdrew.

“Mother, it’s me, Albana.”

Nabala opened her feverish eyes and gazed at Albana without recognizing her. She looked terrible: she was absolutely gaunt, on her skin were the black spots of the illness, her eyes were intensely yellow and there was blood at the corners of her mouth. Albana’s heart sank.

“Mother, it’s me, your little one, Albana,” she said, stroking her forehead gently. It was burning like the flames of a fire.

“Al… bana…?”

She held the trembling hand between her own. “Yes, Mother, it’s me,”

“My precious Albana,” Nabala said. There was a gleam of recognition in her eyes.

Albana could not hold back the disconsolate tears which ran down her cheek.

“Don’t cry, my little one. You’ve always taken care of us both, always. But my time has come.”

“No, Mother, hold firm. I’ll find a way.”

Nabala smiled, her eyes moist. “You’ve always done that. No mother could be prouder.”

“Don’t leave me, Mother, not yet.”

Nabala started to cough, and Albana gave her the bloody handkerchief. Amid convulsions and pain, she coughed up more blood. Her mother’s suffering broke her heart. She had seen her suffer greatly all through her life, ever since she had brought her into this world, in this hellish city. She was the illegitimate daughter of a libertine God, and lived a life which condemned them both to a death from which they had miraculously escaped by the grace of Mother Sea. So much suffering, to end like this: it seemed unbearably cruel to her.

The coughing stopped, and Nabala stroked her daughter’s cheek.

“Mother Sea is already coming to take me to her.”

“No, Mother, don’t go.”

“You’re my pride, the best daughter a mother could have. I want you to know that. Nothing in this life has given me joy except you, my child.”

The tears flowed like a river when a dam breaks under the pressure of the water.

Nabala convulsed once more, then her soul departed.

Albana leaned her cheek on her mother’s chest and cried bitterly. Finally, when she had no more tears left and her pain was transformed into rage, she stood up. She raised her fist and clenched it so hard that her knuckles turned white. Her soul screamed for revenge, her pain was unbearable.

“I swear before my mother’s lifeless body that I’ll avenge her death. I’ll avenge it even if it’s the last thing I do!”

The moon was about to complete its phase and turn full. But that night it would not only be full but would turn crimson, as it was the change of cycle for the Gods. There was an hour to go before midnight when the two Custodians opened the door of the dungeon. They came in with powerful strides, while the three prisoners retreated until their backs came up against the wall. The Custodians were not carrying spears or shields, only short swords at their waists.

Liriana cried out when she saw one of them grabbing Maruk’s wrists to take him away.

“No, leave him!” she shouted, and tried to free him.

“No, Liriana, let them take me,” he begged her. There was deep concern in his voice. “Please don’t intervene.”

Ikai had guessed the two Custodians’ intention when he saw them without their equipment.

“What are you doing?” he asked, trying to gain time to analyze the situation and look for a way out.

“The slave Maruk has been summoned,” a cavernous voice said from beneath the helmet.

“Why? Where are you taking him?” Ikai insisted. He came to stand in the path of the second Custodian.

Liriana was pulling with all her might on the Custodian’s arm, but he was so strong that he was dragging both Maruk and her like deadweight.

“Leave him! You bastards!” she was shouting.

“Let me go, Liriana, by all that’s most sacred,” Maruk pleaded.

The second Custodian tried to move forward, but Ikai stepped sideways and got in his way again.

“This prisoner is very valuable,” he told the Custodian. “You shouldn’t harm him.”

“He might be, but you’re not,” was the Custodian’s reply. He struck Ikai on the chest with his forearm and sent him staggering against the rock wall behind him.

Liriana threw herself at the feet of the Custodian who was dragging Maruk and coiled around them like a boa, squeezing her arms and legs as hard as she could. The Custodian tripped and had to stop to avoid falling backwards.

“Get her off me!” he called to his partner.

Ikai was trying to get back to his feet when he saw something strange behind the two Custodians. At first he thought it was because of the hard blow he had received, but there was something else, something unnatural. A black mist was coming in through the open door of the cell as if it were alive, dancing silently and insinuatingly. The Custodian bent and grabbed Liriana by the shoulders, and was about to pull her away from his partner when the mist gathered on his body. He straightened suddenly and turned rigid, his head drawn back and his arms outspread, with the mist swirling around him.

“What are you waiting for?” the other Custodian demanded.

The shadow cast by the Custodian on the wall behind him moved suddenly. From it Albana came out. Before Ikai could react, her black daggers plunged directly into the back of the Enforcer’s knee. Ikai saw her slashing the tendons. Liriana saw the daggers brush against her arms, which were still clutching the Custodian’s legs. She looked at Albana, eyes wide.

“What’s this?” the Custodian grunted as he tried to turn to locate Albana behind him. But his knees failed him and he folded backwards. Albana rolled to one side, and the Custodian toppled like a felled tree. He hit the wall behind him with his helmet. There was a nauseating *crack* as his neck broke.

Maruk, free of the iron hands of the Enforcer, fell backwards. Liriana, still wrapped around the Custodian’s legs, looked at him for a moment, then let go as if she had been clutching a bunch of nettles.

Ikai stood up and glared at Albana. Rage began to get the better of him at the sight of the woman who had betrayed them. With masterly skill Albana stood behind the Custodian still enveloped in mist. She transferred the two daggers to one hand, and with the other took the Enforcer’s sword and threw it at Ikai.

“Kill him.”

Ikai caught the sword in flight. He looked at Albana for an instant. Her black daggers were dripping with the thick, dark blood of the Custodian. He wanted to run her through with the sword more than anything else at that moment.

“Neck or groin, otherwise you won’t manage to wound him deadly, they’re tough as a rock,” she said with amazing calm.

He took a deep breath. His head told him to kill the Custodian, his heart to kill Albana. He stepped forward, and with one stroke slit the Custodian’s throat. He withdrew the sword and repeated the blow. The thick black blood began to soak the Enforcer’s cuirass.

Albana nodded and murmured something. The mist vanished slowly until it was completely gone, and the body of the Custodian collapsed.

Ikai stepped forward. Now he had the chance to kill her.

Liriana put herself between the two of them.

“Wait!”

“There’s nothing to wait for. I swore if she ever crossed my path again I’d kill her, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“But she saved us from the Enforcers.”

“You don’t forgive treason.”

“I’m with Liriana,” Maruk said, getting to his feet. “She’s saved us. And what’s more, she’s here to help us. Am I right?”

Albana nodded. “He’s smart, your fiancé.”

That comment was like adding fuel to the fire which was already burning inside Ikai. He raised the sword.

“If you kill her we’ll never get out of here alive,” Maruk put in hastily. “We need her to escape from here.”

“Maruk’s right, Ikai. We’re wasting precious time. We have to leave before they find us.”

Ikai glared at Albana’s black eyes and gripped the pommel of the sword angrily. But his rational mind won. They were right, they needed her to get out of there. Killing her was a bad option.

Albana turned on her heels without a word and went out the door. Liriana took the other Custodian’s sword and followed her. Maruk nodded at Ikai and followed Liriana. Finally Ikai let out a long sigh and followed them. Albana led them down a long corridor, where they found another dead Custodian. It was then that Ikai realized how lethal and powerful Albana was. To kill a Custodian was unthinkable for someone like him, someone normal… *But she’s not normal, she’s not like us. There’s something unnatural in her, something that can only come from the Gods. What I’ve seen her do a man couldn’t do, only a God.* For a moment he was glad he had not tried to kill her, even though rage was still burning inside him. Beside the dead Custodian, on a table, he found his throwing dagger and picked it up.

They reached a spiral staircase. After making sure there was no one on duty, they went down. They descended to the bottom of the stairs, which opened onto a dark passage. They hurried along it. Ikai felt a latent dampness, as if the rock walls were weeping. They reached a round chamber with very little light, and Albana stopped in the center of it. Four tunnels led from the chamber. Judging by how far they had descended and the gloom of the place, they must now be in the deepest part of the dungeons. The sound of footsteps came from the east, heavy boots with a firm tread. He strained his ears and counted four Custodians. He tried to penetrate the dark, but could not see them.

“Quick, this way,” Albana urged in a whisper. She must have heard them too.

There came a metallic sound, rasping on the rock.

Albana moved the iron cover and revealed a round passage in the floor.

“Come on, jump in! They’re coming!” she urged them.

Maruk let himself fall, and Liriana followed. Ikai looked at the dark hole, then into Albana’s eyes.

“It had better not be another betrayal…”

“Jump!”

Ikai let himself drop, and fell until he hit rock and water. He rolled to one side and stood up. They were in a huge pipe, with water waist-high. Albana jumped in and with cat-like agility landed on her feet.

“That way,” she said, pointing in the direction of the light, which was coming from the east.

They went on and found that the pipe opened onto a small waterfall which fed into a pond. The height was considerable, more than fifteen feet.

“We have to jump,”

They looked at each other indecisively.

Albana stepped forward and let herself fall. She vanished into the pond.

“Let’s go,” Liriana said.

She and Maruk jumped at the same time. Ikai shook his head and jumped, commending himself to Mother Sea as he did so.

An hour later, hidden behind some statues, still wet, the four fugitives had a distant view of the parade which was taking place along the main avenue. The sweet melody of flutes accompanied by harps, backed by the rhythmic beat of small drums, filled the night. Ikai counted more than a hundred Custodians assembling beside the grand avenue. Gods in their sumptuous gowns marched in pairs on carriages drawn by black chargers. Everything was vivid crimson. The Gods of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring, were displaying all their splendor. Groups of slave girls threw flower petals as their masters passed. The viewers of this sumptuous show were also Gods, which puzzled him.

“What are they doing?” he whispered.

“The Noble Gods of each House, the Lords, are parading before the lesser Gods on their way to the Great Ceremony of Vivification,” Albana

explained. “Tonight is a great night for them, a regular celebration, and deeply important.”

“Why?” Liriana asked.

“Tonight is the full moon, and it’s a Red Moon.” Beyond her pointing finger it was shining so full and crimson it looked as though it had caught fire. “Tonight the Five Kings return.”

“I don’t understand at all,” Ikai said, “but I can see most of the Custodians gathered over there.”

“And all the Gods. No-one will miss this celebration. For them it’s sacred. The parade starts at the palace and then goes on to the royal pier. There the Lords will embark for the Central Ring, where the Ceremony will take place.”

“Let’s take advantage of that, steal a boat and escape,” Maruk said.

“I have a better plan,” said Albana.

A while later, with steady step and head held high, she walked towards the Custodian who was guarding the strange dark building. Not far away behind some bushes, Liriana, Maruk and Ikai watched with anxiety.

“Identify yourself, slave!” came the Custodian’s deep bray.

Albana stopped two steps away from the Guard. Very slowly she took out the disc she wore around her neck and showed it to him.

“I am a Shadow in the service of Oskas, Master-Spy of Lord Asu.”

The Custodian stared at the disc in silence.

“Shadow you are,” he nodded. “Now go on your way. This place is forbidden to you. Only the Masters and the Eyes-of-the-Gods are allowed in.”

Ikai tensed when he heard that. The Custodian was denying her entry.

Albana began to turn, and Ikai saw she was muttering something. Suddenly she turned back to face the Custodian and pointed at him. From her hand came forth that unnatural blackness.

“What are you doing?” grunted the Custodian as he readied his spear.

The blackness reached his helmet and coiled around it.

“Alarm…” he cried in an attempt at warning, but the blackness swallowed his words.

Albana unsheathed her daggers, ready to attack. The Custodian defended himself with his spear. She tried to dodge it, but she was not fast enough and the spear took her in the shoulder.

Ikai got up and ran, sword in hand. He had to finish off the Custodian. He reached him at the moment he swept Albana off her feet with a tremendous blow with his shield. She lay there in pain. Ikai stabbed him in the groin, where the armor was flexible, and the sword buried itself deeply. The spear probed for Ikai’s chest, and he dodged to one side. Behind the Custodian Liriana appeared and stabbed his left thigh. The Custodian swept her aside with his shield, throwing her to the ground and stunning her. Ikai knew he would never be able to defeat that hulk, so he tried to maim him. He plunged his sword into the Custodian’s right thigh and rolled aside. The tip of the spear grazed his temple as he moved away.

Maruk meanwhile had picked up Liriana’s sword and was defending her. The Custodian eyed them, undecided. He put his hand to his throat, trying to give the alarm call, but was prevented by the blackness which surrounded his helmet. For some reason the swine could see through it.

Ikai noticed that the Enforcer was losing a lot of blood. He gestured at Maruk to wait, and he nodded. The Custodian realized what they were attempting and moved towards Ikai, who took one step back, then another. The Custodian followed him like a bloodhound. But his steps were getting slower. Ikai kept as close as he dared, and finally the Custodian fell on his knees.

He sighed with relief. He skirted the Enforcer and went over to Liriana, who was helping Albana to her feet.

“How are you?” he asked.

Liriana had a huge lump on her forehead and a swollen eye which would soon close. Albana was bleeding from the wound on her shoulder.

“Fine,” Liriana said.

“Time to leave,” Albana said. She took out her disc and went into the strange building.

Ikai followed in puzzlement. He noticed that the floor was silver and the wall surrounding it black marble. It was more than fifteen feet tall, and formed a perfect circle. On the walls he saw the runes of the Gods. In the

center rose a rectangular monolith, black as an abyss and polished as steel, rising tall and defiant towards the red moon. It was more than sixty feet tall. And then he knew where they were: in one of the artifacts of the Gods, a portal.

Albana went to stand beside the monolith and activated the disc.

“You mean to say you can use that door?” Ikai asked.

“It’s not only that I can, I know how to do it too. This is how I arrived when we separated.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” asked Liriana. “Let’s go!”

Ikai glanced up at the moon. “I can’t leave yet.”

“Come on Ikai, come with us,” Liriana begged him.

“I have to find Kyra. I can’t leave without her.”

“We can’t stay here waiting, you know,” said Liriana. “They’ll catch us.”

“That, or else I’ll bleed to death,” Albana put in.

“It’s not what I’m asking for.”

“I have to take Maruk to safety. It’s vital. I can’t take any more risks. Come with us, we can get to safety.”

Ikai stepped out of the artifact.

“I’m not leaving without Kyra. Go. Look after yourselves.”

Albana activated the disc, and there came a tremor, followed by a brightness.

“I believe this belongs to you,” Albana said, and threw him the leather bag she had at her back.

Ikai caught the bag and opened it in surprise. The Falcon Eye and the gauntlet were inside.

He looked up at Albana.

“Thank you…” he said awkwardly.

The monolith shone more intensely.

Ikai looked at Liriana, who was holding Maruk’s hand.

“Good luck,” he murmured, a fraction of a second before they disappeared.

He turned back toward the city.

Kyra, I’m coming for you.

30

The door opened, and Adamis came into the room. Kyra was looking out of the window at the moon, full and bloody, which marked the fatal destiny which awaited her that night.

“I didn’t think you’d show up,” she said disdainfully when she saw him.

I want you to know that I have no choice. It is my duty as Prince of my House. The Ceremony is sacred. I cannot interfere in any way. You were Selected for the Vivification, and I can do nothing about it. I am bound by my oath, by my House, by my family, to my honor.

“There’s always a choice.”

He looked down at the floor. *If I try to save you, and I want you to know that I really wish I could, they would condemn us both,* he said.

“You’re all repulsive.”

I do not expect you to understand or accept our form of existence, but I cannot change it…

“You could if you tried. You’re a Prince, a powerful Lord. You can change things from the inside. You can make your House stop enslaving us, stop killing defenseless men and women.”

In the time we have shared, you have opened my eyes to many truths I was blind to, with your indomitable spirit. You have made me rethink the established order of things, you have made me see things in a different way, you have made me feel… things I had never felt before… and for that I thank you, for you have changed me forever.

Kyra saw sincerity and gratitude in his eyes. “Can’t you save me?” she asked, her hopes fading.

He shook his head.

There is nothing I wish for more at this instant, you have to believe me, but my hands are tied by sacred oaths, by law and by family. I am sorry from the bottom of my heart.

“Then go. Leave me alone.”

When the moment of choice comes, follow your instincts.

And with those strange words he closed the door behind him and was gone. And with him, her last hope.

On the stroke of midnight Adamis headed the entourage of the House of Eret. He wore such a rich costume that Kyra had to avert her eyes at such an ostentatious display. The moon, completely full, shone with celestial crimson, tinting the stars which escorted it. The God-Prince walked with his chin high, his gaze lost in the horizon, slender and self-assured. He looked like a shimmering star that night, and Kyra, at the end of the parade, was fighting to hold back the rage and fear she felt within her.

She clenched her jaw. *Damn you!* She hated him so much at that moment that she wished Father Moon would come down from the heavens and devour him in his red wrath. So full and red was Oxatsi’s spouse that she shivered at the sight of him. She could hear the melodious sound of the flutes and harps as rose-petals showered the parade amid the iridescence of golden oil-lamps.

“Just what I needed!” she cursed silently, spitting out a petal which had flown into her mouth. She looked down at the red tunic they had dressed her in and felt as if she were being led to the slaughterhouse. *Bloody soulless creatures! They’re going to sacrifice me like a cow before a feast!* She looked around for some way of escape, but she was surrounded by six Custodians who never left her side.

They moved to the center of the procession. Ahead of her she could see the Lords in their ostentatious gowns following their Prince. All the noble families of the House of the First Ring were represented there, and their beautiful golden faces radiated a narcissistic satisfaction. She turned and saw that a mixture of God-Warriors and Priests were bringing up the rear of the parade.

The avenue they marched through led towards the inner part of the ring. They went into a long tunnel whose walls gleamed silver and illuminated every step. She gazed around uneasily; they were going through the mountain on which the kingdom of the First Ring was. *Where are they taking me? I thought the mountain was solid, so where does this tunnel lead*

to? Her questions were soon answered. They came out of the tunnel onto a quay, which puzzled her. *Sea? Inside the mountain? How can this be?* She stretched her neck, and what she saw left her speechless. Ahead of her rose the giant monolith of the Gods, but not inside the mountain of the First Ring as she had guessed; the incredible artifact stood in a final, central ring, inside the hollow of the mountain surrounded by turquoise water. *Yosane would love this,* she thought, and at the thought of her friend her spirit wavered. *Where are you, my friend, where? Be strong, and resist, fight your fears.* She shook her head. *She'll be all right, she's smart, she'll survive,* she said to herself, trying to cheer her own spirit. She thought of Idana, who worried her more. She was too good and generous. And then fear began to gnaw at her heart.

The retinue reached the pier, where a ship was waiting, as shining as the Gods it was going to carry. They boarded by a crystal gangway, and she wondered at the beauty of the ship. It had been built in the image of a great sea snake; the stern castle was made of gold, with a scaly tail behind it descending to the water. The forecastle was made of silver, ending in a long scaly neck crowned by a ferocious head with enigmatic eyes and huge jaws. The great sail on the central mast was almost transparent, and proudly bore the emblem of the House of Eret. Kyra could not take her eyes off Adamis at the prow. He seemed to command the great sea beast with his will. At his gesture, the snake began to sail towards the monolith.

The breeze caressed her face, and she was immensely grateful. The ship sailed on a calm sea, smoothly but fast. She realized that she was in the center of a great crater lit by hundreds of torches. She saw four channels crossing the First Ring, and on them four ships in the form of great beasts. They were as magnificent as Adamis' ship. She narrowed her eyes and looked at them carefully. She identified the scarlet of the Second Ring and the indigo of the Fifth, amplified by the gleam of lanterns and oil lamps. *All the Houses are coming to the ceremony…* The five ships made their way towards the berth in front of the monolith.

She started to feel the terror she had been managing to keep down until that moment. The inevitability of what awaited her was beginning to oppress her chest like an iron hand, and she was having trouble filling her lungs.

I'm going to die. They're going to sacrifice me.

Adamis had confirmed this, and she had tried to come to terms with it without success. Her fighting spirit could not accept that inhumane death sentence.

Fight! You have to fight!

Now that she saw the ships of the other Houses approaching, filled with all-powerful Gods, her fate was becoming a palpable reality. She shivered with fear, but then shook it off immediately.

I'll fight. I won't give myself up to those merciless pigs!

With that thought in mind, she pushed forward and tried to slip between two Custodians. One of them noticed and pushed his body against the other to stop her. Her hip was trapped. With all her fury she pushed with both legs and managed to break free. The two Custodians turned and tried to catch the slippery prey, but she now had the two extra paces she needed. She reached the gunwale, leapt on to it and jumped with all her might towards the sea. For an instant she flew, then lived the fall toward the water with her spirit filled with the glory of her daring escape.

But the moment her feet touched the water an almost transparent mist coiled around her waist. She felt time stand still, and her legs never broke the surface.

"What the hell is this?" she cried.

The mist, like a spirit from the beyond, gently carried her in its arms back to the ship.

"Let go of me, you vermin!"

There is nowhere to go.

She recognized the mental voice at once: Rotec. She raised her eyes and saw Adamis' Champion glaring at her, his face twisted, controlling the mist with his right hand. He made her come back until she was once again among the Custodians, who closed ranks around her.

"You heartless bastards!"

Keep quiet and do not try that again. I do not wish to use force on you.

She looked back at Rotec. There was no enmity in his eyes, but she knew the great warrior would do anything which was needed for his House. She gave him a look of disdain and folded her arms.

On his knees, on a lesser pier of the First Ring, Ikai watched the light radiating from the Falcon Eye. That strange light which told him where Kyra was. The beam cut through the shadows of the night like lightning in a storm.

It's telling me I should go to the center…

He put the object away hastily, afraid the Custodians might discover him. With his clothes still soaking after his crossing from the Second Ring, he started to move forward at a crouch. Well aware that it was little short of suicide to head for the innermost heart of the First Ring, he was trying to find some option which would give him a slight chance of getting there without being caught. He went on among the shadows, avoiding the light and the monoliths.

Oh, come on! I have to think of something. But the thing he had always been able to count on in the past, his mind, was unable to come up with a viable solution this time. He went on as far as he could, and then was forced to stop.

He squatted behind a low wall and got his breath back. *Think. I can't go on, not like this. They'll see me.*

The cheerful sound of music reached him from the north. He risked a glance and saw the Gods enjoying a sumptuous procession. He also saw a hundred Custodians escorting them. The celebration was very similar to the one he had witnessed in the Second Ring. *As soon as this is over, the patrols will come back and find me.*

He risked getting as close as possible to the parade. He hid behind a well, and saw the divine retinue go into a tunnel. *And how do I get in there? Half the city's here in the parade, if not all of it. Think, think, there has to be another way.* He thought about the city, the five concentric rings, the symmetrical viaducts which cut through them, the bridges which joined them. Everything followed a design, an order, a proportion, a correspondence.

That's it! If there's a tunnel here, there has to be at least one more. The Gods wouldn't build just one. No, it doesn't follow the pattern they've built this strange world to. One isn't in proportion, it's not symmetrical. There have to be either two or four tunnels. He turned and ran in search of the tunnel at the opposite end. With a bit of luck, he would not have to go all

around the ring. There would be four tunnels: one south, one north, one east and one west.

And he was not wrong. He found the east tunnel.

The Gods of the House of Eret were the first to land before the black monolith. Kyra had to pull her head back to see the whole unthinkable height of the arcane object. It was simply colossal, a hundred times bigger than the one she had seen on the island where they had set off for the Eternal City. *Bloody fools!* she thought as she stared at the Lords.

The parade went on to the base of the monolith. As they came nearer, she noticed that it too was immense and made of dazzling white marble. Before the base was a plaza, with three Gods in strange ritual attire guarding the enormous golden doors. The base was more than sixty feet high.

Adamis stopped before the waiting Gods, and the retinue stopped behind him. Kyra leaned forward, and guessed from their attire they were God-Priests. They exchanged greetings and bows with the God-Prince, and the doors opened. Adamis entered the regal building. As Kyra passed under the entrance, she looked back and saw the ship of the Second House docking. Its sails were as red as the full moon over their heads. *Here come all those bloody Gods.* She recognized Lord Asu standing tall at the prow, and fear lashed at her like an Oppressor’s whip.

They went in and stepped inside a golden triangle on the floor. She heard an annoying buzzing and felt a tremor. Suddenly the platform began to rise at great speed. She lost her balance and fell to the floor. One of the Custodians turned to her and pulled her up. She recovered, and the platform stopped, before her there opened a great round chamber. Adamis entered the hall at the head of the retinue. Kyra was left breathless as she too came in and looked around her. The walls of the chamber were the color of old gold, with strange runes engraved in silver along its entire surface. The ceiling was black as a starless night, and she noticed it was not a real ceiling but the base of the monolith. They were just underneath the artifact. As she walked, she detected movement below her feet, and was alarmed to find the floor was transparent. Far below she could see the turquoise of the ocean. They

were so high above the sea, and the floor was so translucent, that she had a sudden attack of vertigo and for a moment almost fell again.

But what made her jaw drop was finding what was inside the chamber. In the center there rose a cylindrical column of the same material as the monolith. It went from floor to ceiling, connecting it with the base. Around the cylinder were five singular pods, forming a star. Her gaze was held by them. They looked like royal sarcophagi, intricately ornamented in the lower part, but the upper part was glass. At the foot of each sarcophagus-pod was engraved the emblem of the House it belonged to. She recognized the shield of the House of Eret on the nearest pod and that of the House of Aureb on the next. As she studied the hall, she had the distinct feeling of being in a funerary chamber. She shivered and shook her head.

But something else had her enthralled, it was the golden gleam which came from the head of the pods, intermittently but in an ordered sequence, and went through a tube to the great central cylinder. When it reached this the gleam went up it, transformed into a ring which disappeared into the ceiling. *It's gone into the base of the monolith… What's happening here?*

Adamis came to stand in front of the pod with the seal of Eret, and the whole retinue followed. The silence in the hall was sepulchral. Kyra was growing increasingly nervous. *This is the place where I'm going to die. A sacrificial chamber…* she said to herself, and wiped her sweating hands on her tunic. Agitation began to run through her body, and her breathing became fast and shallow. *I'm going to die…* She heard footsteps behind her and turned. She met Lord Asu's cruel eyes; he was entering the chamber at the head of his retinue as if he owned the place. The Prince of the Second House stood in front of the pod with the emblem of his House, and his retinue took their place behind him. Kyra ran her eyes along the group and stopped at a slave in a yellow tunic. Surprised, she tried to identify her. She was one of the twelve: Gersa. And beside her, wearing an orange tunic, was another slave.

It was Yosane!

Kyra's heart nearly jumped out of her mouth when she recognized her. With a knot in her throat she tried to call out her name but no sound left her mouth. *Yosane! Yosane!* She tried again and waved so her friend could see her, but she seemed to have been struck dumb. Then she saw the runes of silver on the walls shimmering slightly and realized that the chamber must

be under the Power of the Gods, preventing her from making any sound. She waved with both arms and jumped up and down. Two of the Custodians held her down, but her attempt had been successful. Yosane was waving at her from the other group, her face happy and her eyes moist with excitement. She too was immediately restrained by two Custodians.

Yosane, you're alive, you're all right! Kyra's heart filled with such joy it was about to burst. And at that moment something so horrifyingly wrong dawned on her that her heart sank and she was left breathless. *If Yosane is here like me, it's because she's going to suffer the same fate… She's going to die… like me, with me.* This thought left her as cold as though she had been plunged into a frozen river in the middle of winter. For a long moment she was unaware of what was going on around her. She had known she was doomed, but she had never imagined poor Yosane would perish with her. The remaining Houses proceeded into the chamber, but she only had eyes for her friend and the horror awaiting them. Was Yosane aware of her destiny?

She noticed that Yosane was not looking at her but at another group passing by. She followed her friend's gaze and met that of Idana. She was walking at the end of the group of the Fifth Ring, wearing an orange tunic, and was staring at Yosane with eyes wide. Beside her was Kata.

They're going to sacrifice all twelve of us. The discovery of an atrocity on that scale left her stunned, unable to react. She could not think or hear beyond the beating or her own heart as it hammered inside her head. She felt as if she had been struck on the chin with a stone fist.

They're going to kill us all.

Ikai came out of the water as far as possible from the grotesque vessels of the Five Houses which were moored at the dock. He ran to the back of the monolith's base. There were no guards there; they were all guarding the door inside the building. He touched the white surface with the palm of his hand and thought it must be marble. He slid to the ground, his back pressed against the building.

I need to rest. He had made a superhuman effort to get there, swimming underwater as he had never done before in his whole life. He

gave thanks to Mother Sea for the countless hours he had spent playing in the river during his childhood, and for the harsh training he had undergone to become a Hunter. Otherwise he would never have gotten so far. *We are the Senoca, the people of the Sea,* he reminded himself with a bitter smile.

He tried to resist exhaustion with his remaining strength. He wanted to go on; he had to reach Kyra one way or another. He brought the Falcon Eye out and held it with the gauntlet he never took off now, no matter how heavy it was. He touched the necklace around his neck − Kyra's gift − and thought of her. The Eye activated itself, and the beam of light showed that his sister was inside the building.

I'm nearly there. She's inside. Hold on, little sister, I'm coming.

He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, just to recover his breath and rest his shoulders, which were very sore. But he fell asleep, overcome by exhaustion.

He woke up with a start, coming out of a nightmare. He looked up at the red moon and got to his feet, angry at himself. It had only been a moment, and his body had needed it, but it was still unforgivable. *I have to go on, no matter how tired I maybe, whatever the dangers or the risk. I have to rescue my sister. I can't weaken now. I can't fail.* He clenched his jaw and nodded determinedly. *Here I come!*

He looked at the wall in front of him. It was too high to jump over. He would have to climb it, even though it looked absolutely smooth. This presented a difficulty. Trying to get in through the door was reckless, to say the least; there were several dozen Custodians there. *What can I do?* He studied the structure in detail, and something caught his attention. The reflections of the moonlight on the white marble wall were not constant.

Interesting… there's something going on here… His mind puzzled over this discordant fact. He looked at the wall again; it seemed completely smooth. He backtracked five steps and went on staring closely at it. Nothing. He went back as far as the water.

The moon shone on the monolith. And then he saw it. In the center of the wall of the base was an engraving of a full moon with several runes inside it. It was so snow-white that when seen closely, it melted into the white of the wall. *If there are engravings, there'll be footholds.* He went back to the wall and felt with his hand until he touched the engraving. *There.* He began to climb.

It took him time and effort, and twice he lost his footing and almost cracked his head open, but he managed to climb the wall. When he reached the top he lay on his back, watching the moon. But this time exhaustion failed to overcome him, and he stood up as soon as he felt recovered. In front of him rose the great monolith. He went over to it, searching for some opening where he could let himself down inside. After a few moments he found what he was looking for: two large windows which gave on to the chamber.

He threw himself on to the floor and looked through one of the windows.

And he found his sister.

Kyra watched the five God-Priests moving to the center of the chamber. They climbed on to a pulpit, in the shape of a ring around the conducting cylinder, which rose six feet above the ground. The five Priests each turned towards one of the Houses. They raised their arms, and everyone knelt with the exception of the God-Princes, who remained standing with their heads bowed. She came out of her state of stupor. *What the hell are they doing?*

She looked up at the Priest above her head and had the feeling he must be speaking, even though she could not hear him. Then she remembered Notaplo's gift and looked at the bracelet on her right wrist. *It's not working. Notaplo said I'd be able to hear the conversations of the Gods, but I can't hear anything.* She tapped her fingers on the central rune a couple of times, and the bracelet gave a small flash.

…begins the sacred Ceremony of Vivification, she suddenly heard in her mind. The voice was that of the five Priests, speaking in unison.

The Five Houses are gathered here today at the moment of the full moon, a Red Moon, which marks the end of one sacred cycle and the beginning of another.

Kyra listened carefully, and her fighting spirit began to recover from the tremendous blow her morale had received. *I have to fight. I won't let them get away with this.*

The Five Kings must awake. The cycle of hibernation is over. The sacrifice their Majesties have made for the good of their Houses is over. It

is time once more for them to walk among us, their children: for them to rule their kingdoms for the glory of our civilization. So says the full moon of blood. Let us honor the Five.

A chill ran down her spine. She was beginning to understand what was going on there, but not the reasons.

Let the Vivificators be prepared.

Three God-Erudites appeared at the entrance of the chamber. Their heads were hooded, and their faces remained hidden in the shadows. In their hands they carried golden stylized goblets.

Rotec came to her side. *Let's go,* he said, and gestured.

And what are they going to do to us now?

She went forward with him until she stood in front of the three God-Erudites.

Wait, said Rotec.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the rest of the twelve Selected coming towards her, escorted by the Champions of each House. When Yosane and Idana reached her, she could not hold herself back. She hugged them both with overflowing joy, mixed with fear, at being reunited. They stayed locked in one another's arms, tears running down their cheeks. They tried to speak, but were unable to. She wiped the tears off the faces of the other two, smiling and hugging them over and over again in an attempt to pass on some love and warmth to them.

Divide into groups of four, and then let each group stand in front of an Erudite, came the voice of the Priests, in their minds.

Kyra looked around among her companions and met Lian's haughty face. Kyra gave her a friendly nod, but the blonde threw her a disdainful glance and turned her back on her. Urda, who was beside Lian, saw the nod and shook her head. She walked over to Kyra and offered her hand to her. Kyra looked at the big woman's face and read in it and in her moist regretful eyes the sufferings she had borne. Kyra shook the soldier's hand and nodded to her to join them.

Take your places, came the order.

Kyra glanced behind her with some idea of a crazy escape in her mind, but the idea evaporated as soon as she saw the five colossal Champions watching them. *Hell! Damn these monsters without feelings!* She eyed the

three God-Erudites and for some reason remembered Adamis' words: "When the moment to choose comes, follow your instincts." But her instincts were saying nothing. Carefully she studied the three Erudites one by one, but could not sense anything coming from them. She moved closer, and as she did she felt a tingling in her right hand, where she wore the bracelet. Taking care not to draw attention to herself, she pointed at each God in turn. When she pointed at the one in the center she felt the tingling again. She decided.

She motioned to her friends, and the four girls came to stand in front of the Erudite posted in the center. Urda closed the line. The rest of the prisoners gradually took their places in front of the other two Gods. Kyra glanced to her right and saw Lian heading the other line.

Take the catalytic, the order came.

One by one they passed by the Erudite and drank from the goblet. Kyra did not notice anything strange when she drank, but she knew from the experiments which had been made on her that the liquid had some specific purpose. She felt it was not likely to be a pleasant one.

Let the sacred ritual proceed, came the order from the Priests.

Rotec took her arm and led her away. She tried to resist, break free, go back to her friends, but the strength of the God-Warrior was amazing. With tears of impotent rage in her eyes she saw Yosane and Idana too being dragged, resisting just as she was herself.

Rotec led her to the pod, and she passed in front of Adamis, who did not look at her. *Soulless bastard!* At the foot of the pod, on the floor, she saw a golden circle. Rotec left her on it and went to stand beside Adamis. She was about to move when a golden barrier rose from the floor and surrounded her. Furious, she hammered on the barrier with her fists, but it was unbreakable. She was trapped. She looked anxiously for her friends and saw that they too were trapped, like her. Yosane and Gersa were banging on the barrier which held them captive, with no more success. The twelve of them were imprisoned.

Kyra could now see the God-King. He was lying with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes closed. He seemed to be dead. His golden face was withered and discolored. His hair was white and long. Now she understood who the Five were, and why she had never seen the King, Adamis' father.

The moment has come, the moon is already full and bestows all its power on us. Those Selected for their rare gift are ready. Thousands have been tested at the Summoning, but only a dozen have been blessed with the virtue of serving our revered lords. Let the Vivification commence!

Hearing this anguish gripped her. The floor of the chamber turned black, so that the sea disappeared under the glass. The golden circle under her feet lit up. She had a presentiment of something unpleasant. A hammering buzz penetrated her ears, and suddenly a strong golden light from the floor bathed her from her feet to her head. She began to float in the midst of this luminescence, as if her body had no weight. She realized in horror that she was levitating two hand-spans above the base. The light turned silver, the buzzing intensified and she received a tremendous shock, as if lightning had hit her during a storm. And then she began to convulse amid terrible pain. Her whole body was shaking uncontrollably. In the midst of her agony she felt something else taking place underneath the pain, something arcane. She began to feel more and more tired, as if they were taking away her vitality. She managed to look toward the pod and saw her vital energy being transferred to the King.

They're taking away my life to give it to him!

She felt weaker and weaker. Life was leaving her body.

My life… they're taking it from me…

She tried to fight with what little strength she still had, but she was suspended in air and her body could not stop shaking. It did not respond to her mind.

The bastards! They're killing me!

She turned her head to look at Yosane and saw that she too was going through the same ordeal.

You scum! You've got no right! It's our life!

They were draining her, and she could barely keep her eyes open. They were taking the last drops of life from her body.

She looked towards Adamis, searching for help. But the God-Prince lowered his gaze.

She fought with one last effort to avoid closing her eyes and dying, but there was nothing left in her body, nothing but her fighting spirit. All her energy had been transferred to the God-King.

Kyra’s eyes closed and her body went out.

A new cycle begins. Let their Majesties rise!

Ikai, beside himself with desperation, was hammering on the glass of the great window with the pommel of his dagger. Even with all his strength he could not manage to break the glass.

“No, Kyra, no!”

He hammered again and again, but the glass would not break.

“Hold on, Kyra!”

He battered the glass like a madman, and finally managed to make the impenetrable crystal crack.

“I’m here!”

He looked inside and saw the light which had tortured his sister going out, and Kyra collapsing onto the floor.

“Kyra!”

Suddenly the crystal lid on the King’s pod lifted. He watched the King opening his eyes and sitting up, like a dead man coming back to life inside his coffin. Immediately the God-Prince and the God-Warrior helped him out of his pod. He stood up, and the two Gods knelt before the King. He watched the other pods and saw the same ritual going on at each of them.

Filled with loathing, he realized that the girls had been sacrificed to revive their Kings.

“No, no, no!”

He banged the glass again, possessed by rage and the horror of having lost his sister. The glass was about to break. He would be able to climb down inside.

At that moment there came a hollow clang in the chamber, and the five discs under the girls’ bodies opened. He saw Kyra’s body fall to the void.

“Noooooooooo!”

They had gotten rid of the bodies by throwing them in the sea.

He turned and ran like one possessed. *I lost her! No! Kyra!* He reached the edge of the building and let himself down. He dropped and was still

running when he reached the water. Without a second thought he dived head-first, with all the momentum of his run, and swam to the bottom searching for his sister's body.

He swam until his lungs were about to burst, but could not find her. He went back up to the surface, breathed precious air and went down again. But he could not find Kyra or any of the other twelve prisoners. He was at a loss. He resurfaced again to breathe and watched the surface above him which his sister and the other girls had fallen from, but there was no trace of them. From inside the ring he could see the submerged keels of the five royal ships at the dock.

Where are you, Kyra? He went under again and swam towards the keels of the ships, noticing as he did so that it was not five keels he could see but six. He had taken for granted that they would be the five ships of the Five Houses. But no, there were six keels. He went up to breathe and swam with all his strength to the sixth ship. When he was close to it he submerged until he was immediately beside the hull. He surfaced to breathe, taking great care not to be discovered by some guard at the dock.

He stared at the ship, which was a large trireme. *Damn, they haven't lowered the anchor.* There was only one way to get on board from the water, a very risky one, but he was too desperate to care about the risk. He looked at the long oars touching the water, motionless, awaiting the order to row. He went to the last one and gave it a tug. He tugged it again. It was fastened in place. He started to climb on it under cover of the shadows of the night. When he reached the end of the oar, through the hole he saw the terrified eyes of a slave. He put his finger to his lips and glared at him. The slave looked back at him for a moment, then nodded. Ikai thanked him with a nod and finished climbing aboard. He sneaked into the forecastle.

A stench hit his nostrils with such force he thought he had been attacked by a Custodian. He shook his head and covered his nose with his hand. The smell was nauseating, putrid. In the middle of the deck he saw a huge hatchway, partly covered with a canvas. Then he understood where he was, and the reason for the stench. The hull of the ship must be filled with corpses. It was the Ship of the Dead.

He heard footsteps on the gangway and hid. He saw twenty or so slaves carrying bodies which had just been fished out of the water and

throwing them through the hatchway onto the pile of the dead. He saw them throw Kyra's corpse on top of another of the prisoners with her.

He muffled a moan.

He was about to come out when he saw an Oppressor arrive on the gangway and chivvy the slaves to get on board quickly. He stopped and hid again. *I can't stay here. I can't. I have to get to her.* Desperate, risking being seen, he ran along the deck. He commended himself to Mother Sea, then with a powerful leap threw himself head-first through the hatchway onto the pile of corpses before the Oppressors boarded the ship.

His head hit something hard. Pain exploded in his head as if he had hit it against a rock wall at full tilt.

He lost consciousness.

The stench woke him. Dizzy, he tried to open his eyes, but the intense headache that struck him made him close them at one. He touched the painful spot and found a scab.

I've been bleeding. What happened? Where am I? He managed to open his eyes and saw the light of day coming through a hatchway, covered with sailcloth. He turned his neck and met a lifeless face. He was startled into trying to stand, but tripped, fell backwards and rolled over the bodies.

And then he remembered. *Kyra!*

He began to climb the pile of corpses, clutching his stomach while his mind sought to deny the horror which surrounded him. *Kyra!* She was all that mattered, and he did not care about being in the midst of that nightmarish place. He searched among the bodies, turning over the faces to identify them. The stench was so strong he had to wrap a piece of cloth from one of the corpses over his nose.

The waves hit the hull of the ship and he lost his balance. *We're sailing!*

"Come on, you useless slaves!" he heard an Oppressor shouting on the deck, and then the lash of his whip. "More spirit! Row with more spirit, or it'll be your skins!" – and he lashed the slaves again.

Ikai continued searching anxiously, until at last he found her.

She was not moving. She had no pulse. She seemed not to be breathing.

He dragged her away from the hatchway to the shadows of the hold and tried to bring her back to life.

Come on, come on, Kyra!

He breathed air into her lungs.

Come on, little sister, come back to me!

He went on trying to bring her back, aware only of anguish and despair.

Kyra, don't leave me!

But Kyra would not come back.

Amid insufferable pain, so that he wanted to takeout his own heart with his hands, he put his sister's head on his chest and rocked her.

"Why you? Why?" he cried desolately, stroking his dead sister's hair and face.

"Why?" he kept repeating over and over again between sobs. "Why?" Sanity was beginning to leave him in the midst of a suffering which his mind could not cope with.

Night came, but he could not stop weeping. His pain was as fathomless as Mother Sea. He cried until he had no more tears left. His strength failed him, and the darkness took him with his dead sister in his arms.

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He was woken by the damp, annoying drip of water on his face. He half-opened his eyes and found it was pouring with rain. He was lying on the floor, but he did not move; he was so thirsty he opened his mouth and let the water from the heavens fill it with its freshness. He swallowed, and his sore throat was grateful.

Where am I? he wondered, disoriented, and then he remembered the hold of the ship. Suddenly Kyra's dead face leapt to his mind. He felt the abysmal pain, and the anguish which followed would not even let him breathe. When the pain ebbed, albeit very little, he tried to rise. He was surrounded by a dark wall three feet high. He swept it with a glance until he reached a huge totem which rose behind him. Its face, with its great golden eyes, was disfigured by an expression of horror.

What's going on here? He stopped to look around before getting to his feet. Something did not fit. The floor he was lying on was black marble with white veins, and the structure was round, with an open entrance. He was surrounded by bodies: dead slaves. *This is some kind of temple,* he guessed, looking at the huge, sinister totem which looked decidedly ominous.

Two slaves, soaked by the torrential rain, came into the structure. He played dead and pretended his body was as rigid as a board while they laid a body down beside him.

"Come on, you scum! Faster!" came the Oppressor's voice, followed by the crack of a whip.

He risked a glance toward the opening through the curtain of water and understood what was happening: they were unloading the corpses from the ship on to a beach. Thinking he was dead, they had taken him from the ship's hold and left him in that strange temple with the others.

"Hurry up, we haven't got all day!" came the voice of another Oppressor.

Ikai glanced to both sides, but could not see Kyra. Rage began to grow inside him again, a murderous rage. He wanted to kill all those soulless creatures, wanted to with all his will. He wanted to get up and fight, but his arms would not respond. He realized he was very weak: too weak. They unloaded several more corpses and he forced his rage down, because if he confronted the Enforcers of the Gods in his present state all he would get was his throat cut.

He opened his mouth again and let the rain fill him and refresh his body, while the slaves finished their funereal work.

“All on board!” he heard an Eye-of-the-God say in his screeching voice.

He waited with an infinite patience he did not know he had, holding back the rage and frustration which threatened to erupt like a volcano. With what little strength he still had, he stood up and hid, crouching, behind the wall. The Ship of the Dead weighed anchor and slowly left the wide inlet, while the storm began to lessen.

On the deserted beach he saw two more temples, with their huge totems of death. He looked around. It was a desolate scene. He counted around thirty corpses on the temple floor. He glanced toward the second temple and saw that it too was full of bodies. They had unloaded the ship and left the bodies in the three temples. By the look of it, it appeared they had distributed them according to how long they had been dead.

He gathered what little courage he had left and searched for his sister’s body. He had to give his final goodbye according to the Senoca tradition. It did not take him long to find her at the foot of the horrible totem. He dropped to his knees beside her, and could not hold back his tears at the sight of Kyra’s wan face.

“What am I going to tell Mother? I promised to find you and bring you back. How am I going to tell her? I can’t. She’ll be inconsolable. Solma will die from pain and sorrow.”

He picked her up in his arms and brought her outside the temple. He laid her down gently on the sand, with the sea in the background and the wild waves sweeping the sand of the beach.

“I’ll give you a last farewell, with Mother Sea beside you,” he said, with the sea breeze ruffling his hair.

It is the first time that a talking corpse has been delivered to us, he heard an amiable voice say inside his head. He could make no sense of this, and stayed with his eyes fixed on the sky with its covering of gray clouds.

There's always a first time for everything, I guess.

He stood up and turned towards the vegetation behind the beach, and his heart sank. Above a rise, at the foot of the beach as if reigning over it, he saw a God, followed by several dozen Enforcers. He could not identify this God or the Enforcers; he had not seen them before. They were different, in a sinister way. The Enforcers were similar in size to an Oppressor, perhaps a little gaunter. Their ochre skin was nearly black and their prominent veins white instead of black. They wore no armor, only a tunic, black as night, with a white rune on the chest. Silver helmets covered their heads, with bars over eyes and mouth. Their look was ominous.

A live specimen is a rarity in this place. I shall enjoy it immensely, the God said, and Ikai shivered. The God was dressed in black from head to toe, with the exception of a silver sash where he carried two curved daggers. This God was not like the ones in the Eternal City, of that he had no doubt. On his golden forehead, on his clean-shaven head and below his eyes, were strange runes tattooed in black. A gleam in the eyes of that golden creature made Ikai narrow his eyes and notice those of the Gods. They were black, with golden irises and white pupils.

Ikai shivered and felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He reached for his throwing dagger at his back. *It seems the time has come to die at last. But I'll die fighting. Without fear, beside my sister.*

But the sinister God and his servants turned suddenly to the left, ignoring him. Perplexed, he followed their gaze. To his amazement, he saw a small black building at the end of the beach and three Gods walking towards them over the sand. The strange black building was familiar, and he realized that it was really one of the arcane doors of the Gods, like the one Albana had used to escape with Liriana and Maruk.

My eyes must be deceiving me, as they recognize no less than the heir to one of the prominent Five Houses. And that is not possible, for my cousins from Alantres, the wonderful Eternal City, would never set foot in our humble dwelling. Is that not so, my dear Lord Adamis?

Adamis came to stand beside the God. *Your eyes do not deceive you, Lord Woz.*

And who comes with the heir Prince of the House of Eret on this surprising visit?

Rotec comes with me, my Champion. And Notaplo, my First Erudite.

Ikai did not know what to do. He stood there with the dagger in his hand, staring from one God to the other as they talked inside his head.

Perhaps it would be convenient to talk in private... Adamis suggested, looking at Ikai and the servants of Lord Woz.

Nonsense. This is Hiltok, the island of the House of Hila, the banished House. There are no secrets here. And what is more, I shall allow this insignificant surviving slave to witness this encounter and listen to what you have come to propose, because you must want something...

As you wish. This is your land, and the laws of your House rule. They must be respected.

Then tell me, cousin, what powerful reason has made these most radiant and important Lords visit us in our exile? I cannot recall the last time a Lord visited us. I know you loathe us and avoid us as if we were carriers of some contagious disease.

Let me remind you, cousin, that it was not we who broke the laws of Mother Nature and used forbidden Power. The exile of the House of Hila was unanimously agreed by the Council of Five. The punishment, isolation, allowed you to keep your heads...

True. Irreconcilable ideological differences, I am afraid. What are you looking for here, Adamis?

I want the living slaves on this beach.

The slaves on this beach belong to me. It was part of the treaty of exile decided by the Houses.

The dead slaves belong to you, that is stipulated. I do not wish to know what for, as I am not interested in the forbidden arts of the House of Hila. But the living do not belong to you.

Hmmm. And what interest in this slave does the powerful and influential Adamis have, to make him set foot on the sands of Hiltok?

Ikai stared at Adamis, not understanding what relationship there might be between the two of them. Then he recalled seeing this God before, and the giant with him. He had seen them with Kyra.

If you will allow me... Adamis said, pointing at Ikai’s feet.

Of course, go ahead, Lord Woz said, sounding intrigued. He folded his arms and smiled, amused.

Adamis nodded at Notaplo, who went to Ikai. He knelt at his feet and studied Kyra's face.

"What are you doing?" Ikai asked, brandishing his dagger menacingly when he saw the old God holding Kyra's head.

Do not fear, young man. I wish to help her.

"You're too late. She's dead. You can't help her."

Notaplo took a disc out of his tunic. It was of crystal, and inside it was a tiny nugget of gold which shone intensely. He placed the disc on Kyra's forehead, and there was a metallic snap. The disc attached itself to her forehead.

Ikai's body tensed.

The old Erudite smiled at him kindly. *Do not be afraid...*

Ikai had no idea what he wanted to do, but he was feeling more uneasy with every passing moment.

Suddenly the disc divided in two, and the upper part started spinning, flashing as it did so. On Kyra's face appeared black veins, which extended first down her neck and then all along her body.

"Let her be!" Ikai cried. He could not hold back while they desecrated his sister's body. He tried to shove the God-Erudite, but was immediately surrounded by a white mist which gradually pushed him back towards the sea.

The voice of Adamis reached him as he controlled the arcane mist. *You must let Notaplo finish.*

The disc gave another flash and began to inject the gold from its centre into the black veins which now ran all over Kyra's body, from her forehead down to her arms and legs.

Ikai was pushing back with his failing strength, but it was impossible to overcome the resistance of the mist and reach his sister.

"Leave her alone!" he shouted desperately.

The disc stopped spinning and the two halves once again became one. The nugget had turned black; the gold had been consumed. There came another metallic snap, and Notaplo removed the disc.

Powerless, Ikai watched his sister’s body. The gold in her veins slowly vanished, as if it had reached her heart and been assimilated. Suddenly, before his astonished eyes, Kyra convulsed violently. A new and terrible spasm shook her, as if she had been hit by a lightning bolt. He watched in amazement. A third discharge shook her whole body.

She opened her eyes.

And sat up.

Ikai fell on his knees and burst out weeping, overwhelmed by emotion.

“Notaplo, where... am I? What... happened?” Kyra muttered as she recognized the old God-Erudite beside her.

Notaplo smiled broadly. With moist eyes he answered: *What happened is that we nearly lost you, little one, but everything is all right now.*

Kyra looked around, still stunned, and recognized Adamis and Rotec behind Notaplo. When she saw Adamis looking at her steadily, Kyra felt a strange fluttering in her stomach, and a sudden feeling of wellbeing warmed her chest. The sounds of waves breaking on the beach and muffled sobs reached her ears. She turned in surprise.

And saw Ikai. Her eyes opened wide.

“Ikai!” she cried, and her heart almost burst out of her. She jumped up to run to him, but her legs failed her and she fell. She rose immediately, took a few steps and fell on the sand again.

He was shaking his head in disbelief. “Kyra, you’re alive!” he shouted.

“Ikai, my brother!” she shouted joyfully to the sky, with tears in her eyes. She crawled to him.

“You’re alive! Alive!” he said, and spread his arms.

Kyra rushed into them, and on their knees the two hugged each other in an embrace so intense and filled with such emotion that their bodies ached. Ikai’s tears slid over Kyra’s forehead, while hers soaked his shoulder.

“I told them, I told them all you’d come for me.”

“Always, little sis, always. I’d never leave you.”

They remained in one another’s arms, ignoring everything around them in that moment of limitless fraternal happiness.

Lord Woz, who was watching the scene, applauded dramatically.

And there was me thinking today would be just another ordinary day, he said, shaking his head with a smile, *and I have just witnessed the House*

of Eret returning life to the dead. Something which, if my memory does not fail me, is totally forbidden. One of the main reasons why the House of Hila, my own sublime House, was expelled from Alantres and banished to this island.

Not exactly, Adamis said with a faint smile. *The young slave was not dead. No law has been broken, much less one so important. Not by my House.*

If she was on the funerary ship, she was dead.

Almost, but not fully, Notaplo said. He waved a finger. *One drop of essence of life remained in her. One drop was saved. What I have done is transfer something extra of vital essence to her body, and that is why she has revived.*

A pity that is so, Lord Woz said with a shrug. *Alive she certainly is, therefore you can have her. It is the law.*

Thank you, Lord Woz, Adamis said. He bowed his head.

Kyra looked at her brother, whom she had missed so much and who more than once she had thought she would never see again. She could barely believe it was him, that he was there, with her. But he was. She stared at his odd eyes, one of each color, his brown hair in a tangle, and his kind, weather-worn face. Suddenly what had happened began to come back to her: the Ceremony of Vivification… the reactive… the Five God-Kings… her life being transferred to them… to the last drop… till she had died… the twelve Selected… dying…

“Yosane! Idana!” she shouted. Leaving her brother’s arms she turned and ran inside the temple in search of them.

Ikai got to his feet and ran after her.

“Where are they? Where?” she said as she searched desperately. “They have to be here… they have to… they were with me…” she mumbled as if she had lost her mind, without noticing she was being watched.

Broken-hearted, she found the bodies of the other Selected, and panic overcame her. She knelt beside them and found Yosane. Her face was ashen, her small body damp and covered with bruises. Beside her she found Idana, whose face showed there was no life in her.

“Help me, Ikai, please!” she cried, and began to pull them both. Ikai helped her. They brought them outside and laid them on the sand. Kyra put

her hands on Yosane's face, and her tears fell on the eyes of her fearful and intelligent friend. She held Idana's cold hand in hers. Kyra thought her heart would burst into a thousand pieces.

She turned to Notaplo. "I beg you, save them," she pleaded, sobbing. "I'll do whatever you ask of me, but save them!"

Notaplo came to her side. *I do not know if I can.*

"Please try."

Only those who drank the reactive with you have a chance. The rest, I fear, have gone now. There is no life left in them.

Kyra understood what had saved her: the reactive. She looked at Notaplo, who nodded.

You chose well… the Erudite said.

"Both of them drank with me, I'm sure, and the fourth one was… Urda," she said, pointing to her.

"I'll get her," Ikai said, and brought Urda to where Yosane and Idana lay.

Notaplo looked at his master for permission. Adamis nodded.

I will try, but there is no guarantee.… Notaplo said.

From his tunic he brought out three discs, all of them with a golden nugget in the center. He knelt carefully, leaning on his staff, and placed them on the girls' foreheads.

They all watched in silence. The same process which had taken place with Kyra was repeated with the three Selected. When it had finished, Notaplo withdrew the discs and put them away. There was a moment of tension when nothing happened. And then Yosane began to convulse, Idana followed her, and finally it was Urda's turn to shake uncontrollably. Kyra watched speechless, with such a tight knot in her throat that she could not swallow, and could barely breathe.

Yosane's eyelids moved, and her small gray eyes looked up at the sky.

"Yosane!" Kyra cried euphorically, and threw herself at her.

"What… what's happening?" muttered the little constructor, with a look of wonder.

"Yosane! You're alive! Alive!" Kyra was shouting, hugging her with tears of happiness running down her cheeks.

Idana sat up and looked around with her prominent blue eyes. There was a look of astonishment on her pale freckled face. Her curly hair was a mess of dirt.

“Where are we?” the apothecary asked in confusion, gazing at the sky.

Kyra got to her knees and embraced Idana.

“Idana, you’re all right! Oh, how wonderful!” They hugged and cried with pure happiness at being together and alive.

“I can’t… believe… we’re together again…” Yosane murmured, her eyes still filled with tears, staring at the faces of her two friends.

“Survive and escape, I told you,” Kyra reminded Yosane as she dried her tears with her sleeve. “Survive and escape!”

Yosane smiled and took Kyra’s face in her hands.

“I was always telling myself that, particularly at the worst moments… I remembered your words, and they gave me strength to go on. Survive and escape!” she said with a sweet smile.

“I hadn’t lost hope… I always wanted to think we’d survive… somehow… I always kept the hope,” murmured Idana.

Kyra ruffled her tangled hair. “You’ve always been kind, generous and willing, and your great heart has room for all our hopes.”

Idana, Kyra and Yosane threw their arms around one another. For some time they did not move, locked together in a fraternal embrace, as the horrifying experience had made sisters for life of the three girls.

Ikai watched them with joy in his soul at having found Kyra and seeing her happy, even if it were only for one tiny moment in that universe of hostile, ruthless Gods.

Kyra looked for her brother and smiled at him from the bottom of her heart. Then she saw Urda, sitting with her shoulders slumped, at the opening to the temple, gazing in silence at Lian’s corpse. Kyra went over to her and gazed at the bodies of the remaining twelve: Lian, Kata, Lirune, Jismen, Miru, and the others.

“They didn’t deserve this…” Urda said sadly.

“No, they didn’t deserve it,” Idana said, coming over to them. “I’d give anything to have been able to prevent their deaths… Why them and not me is beyond me, but I’d gladly have given my life for theirs.”

“That does you credit,” Yosane said. She put her hand on the apothecary’s shoulder.

Kyra turned to Notaplo. “I beg you, if there’s anything that can be done for them…” she said, her soul bleeding for the loss of her companions.

Notaplo shook his head. *They are gone now. There is no life in them. There is nothing I can do for them. I am sorry.*

Yosane knelt before the fallen. “Let’s say our farewells,” she said tearfully.

The four survivors knelt in silence. Idana chanted an ancient prayer from the Senoca funeral rites, one to Mother Sea and the other to Father Moon, so they would gather the departed into their bosoms. Then, crossing her arms over her chest, she prayed:

“Oxatsi, watch over them, daughters of your chosen people, let them dwell in your infinite kingdom.” She turned with arms spread out towards Mother Sea. Behind her Kyra, Yosane and Urda followed her example. “Protect them from all evil and ensure their eternal happiness, Father Moon, that which they could not find among men. May this short earthly life become infinite and joyful in the arms of Mother Sea and Father Moon.” She raised her arms to the sky, and the other three girls did the same.

They were silent for a long moment.

Yosane rose to her feet with tears in her eyes, not only of sadness but of rage. “Before the bodies of my murdered companions I swear I shall never fear again, that my legs shall never again tremble, nor my spirit fail before horror and injustice! I shall gather strength from their memory when fear assails me, to fight, for them, for their courage.”

Kyra smiled at her. “That’s a good funeral vow. You honor the tradition.”

“And I’ll keep it. I’ll never again be the frightened, defenseless little animal I used to be. Never again.”

Urda nodded at her in recognition.

The sea breeze blew strongly, bringing moistness and a salty tang on its invisible wings, buffeting all those on the beach.

Lord Woz straightened and looked out at the horizon. He frowned. *What I have witnessed here today is truly fascinating,* he said with his hands behind his back. *This Erudite of yours, Adamis, is a true eminence, I must*

admit. All the same, we prefer the dead to the living. They are much more useful to us…

We shall always disagree about that, Adamis replied carefully.

Lord Woz gave a small guffaw. *I smell a storm, one which will soon fall on this beach,* he said as he looked at the sky. *So, my dear cousin, I am very sorry, but I must kindly ask you to leave our island and take your "living" with you. It is time for us to harvest our dead.*

We are in the House of Hila and its laws we respect. We are leaving, Adamis said with a small bow. He looked at Kyra and beckoned her discreetly to follow him.

An ominous gust of wind hit them.

Not so fast! came a fierce, booming voice.

They all turned towards the sound. Three figures were walking towards them from the portal. Kyra gave a muffled curse, and Yosane's blood ran cold.

It was Lord Asu, and his eyes glittered with fury!

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Lord Asu came toward them along the beach with flaming eyes, the scales of his golden armor shining with each step and his cape burning, whipped by the sea breeze. Beside the Prince of the House of Aureb came his giant Champion Iradu, wearing heavy crimson combat armor. Behind them followed a figure in dark clothes and a helmet with a mirror visor. They came to within five paces of Adamis and Rotec, who were watching them tensely, their faces grim. Kyra, Ikai and the rest of the group watched from several paces behind the two Gods of the House of Eret.

My dear Lord Asu, what an unexpected pleasure! Lord Woz said ironically.

Lord Asu gave him a hostile look and grimaced. He pointed a finger at him.

This is of no concern to you, or your House, he said.

That may be so, cousin, but I think you should remember where you are…

I know perfectly well which cursed sands I am treading and whose House they belong to, you do not need to worry about that. Now, if you will forgive us, I have a debt outstanding with these treacherous vermin. His finger stabbed at Adamis.

Lord Woz folded his arms. *I shall be watching,* he said, glancing along the beach, *for though it is true this is none of my business, it does affect me, as this is my house…*

Lord Asu nodded. His fiery gaze met that of Adamis. *Oskas, my Master-Spy,* he said, gesturing at the man in dark clothes, *has informed me of an inconceivable betrayal perpetrated by the heir of the House of Eret himself. I did not want to believe such an accusation, but Oskas is infallible in his work, and when he discovers an undercover action he is rarely mistaken. I had no choice but to check the information myself. And what my eyes see* — he glared at Yosane and her friends — *is high treason, punishable by death.*

Adamis straightened. *There has been no treachery. That accusation lacks validity.*

How dare you! Do you think I am blind? Or stupid perhaps? thundered Lord Asu. *Those slaves are Selected!*

They might be, but even so, no treason has been committed, Adamis said calmly. Rotec and Iradu on the other hand were tense. Their hands had gone to the hilts of their swords.

The law forbids any interference whatsoever with the Ceremony of Vivification. Those four slaves should have been consumed until there was not a single drop of life in their bodies for the good of our Fathers, the High Kings. If they are alive it is by your doing, and for that, death awaits you!

Or perhaps by some hazard of life, Notaplo intervened. *It is not the first time a slave has survived the ritual…*

Shut up, old man! No slave has survived in more than eight hundred years, since we finished perfecting the process of vivification!

Be that as it may, Adamis said, with the same calm his gray eyes conveyed, *your accusations have no value without proof to back them with. You may take them before the Council, but the Five High Kings, now recovered with the vital essence of the Selected, will not be benevolent if you accuse a Prince of a rival House without proof.*

They are my proof! Give them to me!

I am afraid I can do no such thing.

Kyra looked at her bracelet, then at Yosane. “The bastard is demanding Adamis to turn us over to him.”

Yosane stepped forward. “Never! Never again! You won’t imprison me again, subject me to your experiments, kill me the way you did with Gersa! Never!” Yosane shouted with her fist raised threateningly, her fear forgotten forever, the strength of determination and courage filling her heart.

Kyra in turn caught her friend’s fire, and her warrior spirit cried out for justice. “Someday you’ll pay for all this, for the thousands of defenseless lives you’ve sacrificed, for all the suffering and pain you’ve caused to men!”

Asu’s face twisted, and his eyes flamed so hard it seemed they would leap out of their sockets. *How dare you address me like that, you filthy slaves?* he yelled, beside himself with fury. *Me! You shall pay for this*

affront with blood! I shall make you suffer until you lose your sanity. You will beg me to end your lives, but I will not, I shall inflict more pain, much more! So overwhelming was the Prince of Fire's cry of wrath that the four girls received a brutal mental blow and fell to the ground.

I will not let you harm them, Adamis said. His gaze had turned fierce.

I can do what I please with them. They are slaves, and you are nobody to deny me my right.

The slaves were selected for one purpose, and they have fulfilled it. Now they are under my protection.

Lord Asu gave a hollow laugh. *You have always been a weak prince. All the Houses say so: the prince who likes the company of slaves. Perhaps they would understand if it were a matter of the flesh; pleasure, after all, seduces all of us. But that is not your case, is it? No, it is much worse, you fraternize with those filthy cockroaches only because you are weak, repulsive, like them.*

Your insults reveal only the weakness of your character.

Lord Asu clenched his jaw so hard that it almost broke. *This is my last offer. You can keep your slave if you want her so badly, but the rest are coming back with me. Accept it, or blood will spatter the sand of this beach with red. And believe me, I am more than willing to prove how much more powerful the Prince of the House of Fire is than the Prince of the House of Ether.*

When he heard the threat of bloodshed, Lord Woz tensed.

Lords, Princes…

I told you not to interfere, Lord Asu told him with undisguised hostility, then glared back at Adamis. *Your final answer?*

Adamis turned to look at Kyra. She understood what his look asked her. He could save her, but her friends would perish, and Ikai with them. No matter how much she might want to leave, she could never do so by condemning her friends and family. Kyra held Adamis' sincere gaze for a moment, then shook her head. The Prince sighed, and his eyes showed deep sorrow and resignation. He nodded at Kyra and faced Lord Asu. Kyra understood in that look the magnitude of what she had asked of Adamis. The Prince did not have to do it; she was nothing to him, a mere slave, a passing entertainment. *He won't confront Lord Asu or any other God for*

me. He won't do it. I'm nobody to him, nothing. It would be madness. And she realized they were all doomed.

So? Lord Asu demanded.

A tense and deadly silence grew between the two princes. Adamis looked up at the sky and replied:

The slaves are under my protection.

Stupid fool! You have given me the excuse I was hoping for!

Adamis murmured a word, and before Lord Asu had finished his sentence an ethereal sphere enveloped the Prince of Eret. At once Rotec drew his sword and activated the huge round shield of his gauntlet. Iradu, imitating Rotec's moves, drew his sword and armed his shield of fire. Asu twisted his hand, and a sphere of fire surrounded him. At the same time a fiery ball appeared on his palm.

Notaplo stepped back, pulling Kyra and the others with him.

Let us run to the Portal!

"Up!" cried Ikai, and they ran towards the higher part of the beach, where Lord Woz was watching as he withdrew from the Gods across the sand.

Asu turned towards Oskas. *Capture them and kill the old Erudite.*

The Master-Spy nodded at his master and ran after the group.

Asu exchanged a glance with Iradu. *Kill his champion,* he ordered. Iradu nodded. *Leave me Adamis. I want to enjoy tearing out his heart.*

Rotec immediately murmured a word of Power, and his sword turned translucent. Iradu caused his own sword to burst into flame. They saluted each other respectfully, like the Champions of their Houses they were. This was going to be a combat to the death, as they both knew. The two best warriors of all Alantres were going to fight, and only one would remain as the unchallenged Champion. Iradu charged Rotec with the speed of lightning, his cape flaming with wild intensity, propelled by the combustion of air behind him. Rotec met his assault, protected behind his translucent shield of ether. Iradu's sword of fire hit Rotec's shield with colossal force, but Rotec withstood the assault without yielding a step. The two warriors exchanged master-strokes at amazing speed: cuts, strokes followed by backstrokes, counterstrokes in the form of flashing traces of light which appeared and disappeared in an instant. Such was the skill of both

Champions, and so evenly-matched were they, that neither could manage to break the other's defense. The swords met and the shields rejected attacks and thrusts. Two God-Warriors fought with unrivalled skill.

Next to the Champions, Asu surrounded Adamis with flames. A circle of fire of overwhelming intensity enveloped him. Beneath his feet he saw the rune of the eagle of fire, and he knew the flames would devour everything they met upon the circle. The Prince of Ether concentrated and sent more Power to reinforce his protective sphere. Through the translucent surface and the voracious flames which were consuming everything, he could see the ruthless face of his enemy, the Prince of Fire. He had given Asu the excuse he needed, and for a long time the Prince of Aureb had wanted to kill him. The frozen finger of fear reached his spirit, but he rejected its touch. Asu was the most powerful of the Lords, and that made him a formidable adversary. But it was not always the strongest who achieved victory; sometimes it was those with the quickest wits.

Iradu moved his shield aside and pronounced a word of Power. A scorching flame erupted in front of Rotec. The Champion protected himself behind his shield, but the tongues of fire surrounded him, reached his armor and burned his body. With a grunt he took a step back and raised a mist of essence, which surrounded him. The flames advanced toward Rotec, but sputtered out on contact with the mist. Iradu narrowed his eyes and drew back his head. With a bestial roar he sent a cone of fire at Rotec, who countered it by sending an ethereal breath against him. At the touch of fire and ether, the fire weakened and went out.

Twisting his sword, Iradu threw a ball of fire against Rotec. The shield stopped it, but it exploded on impact. Rotec was thrown back, and hit the ground hard. Iradu gave an extraordinary leap. In midair, with a twist of his sword, he sent a fiery thrust at Rotec. Adamis' Champion rolled and dodged it an instant before it hit him. Iradu stood over him and tried to run him through with his sword of fire. From his position on the ground, Rotec deflected the thrust with his shield, then with his sword sent an ethereal dagger towards his rival's face. Asu's Champion did not see the thrust of Power in time. The translucent dagger reached his eye, but at the last instant he sensed it. He moved his head sideways, and the dagger cut him deeply from the corner of his eye to his ear. He took a couple of steps back and put his hand to his wound, which was bleeding profusely. Rotec leapt to his feet. Iradu pronounced a word of Power, and a burning rune took shape

beneath his opponent's feet. The rune exploded with a blast and Iradu was launched into the sky by the explosion, leaving behind him a wake of fire.

Asu also pronounced words of Power, and beneath his feet Adamis saw the glyph of the volcano form. The ground began to shake, and he was only able to keep his balance with an effort. Suddenly the earth split open with a blast, and a volcano began to surge from it. Adamis cursed. If he lost his balance and the control of his sphere, he would be consumed by the flames. The volcano rose sixty feet above the ground and began spewing fire and lava onto the beach. Adamis struggled with all his might not to unbalance, with everything around him a fiery nightmare. The heat was so suffocating that he had to draw on more of his reserve of Power, so that the flames would not penetrate his barrier and finish him off: asphyxia was as dangerous as fire. He dug in his feet, flexed them and spread out his hands, controlling the sphere. At the same time he saw Asu's eyes gleam with pleasure. The whole beach was a chaos of flames and burning coals, the shallows of the sea were burning, and the lava was solidifying as it entered the water. Adamis was sweating. He was in a desperately tight spot; his rival was unleashing all he had against him, and this time the icy hand of fear closed on his heart.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lord Woz retreat inside the thicket to avoid the flames. In the distance he saw the group running towards the portal. He had to give them time, he had to get Asu to focus all his power of destruction on him, or the flames would catch up with them. Notaplo was running too slowly, and the destruction Asu had unleashed was increasing.

Is that all the Prince of Fire can do? Adamis taunted him.

Asu clenched his fiery fists and glared furiously at him.

I will kill you! By the heavens, I will kill you, you accursed vain weakling! I will tear your heart from your charred body and spit on it!

Adamis smiled. He had achieved what he wanted. Seeing him smile, Asu turned mad with rage. He began to hurl tremendous balls of fire against Adamis, one after the other. They exploded with such intensity that Adamis was forced to retreat towards the sea. He was keeping all his concentration and Power on making his protective barrier hold. He knew Asu was using huge amounts of Power against him, and sooner or later his reserve would run out, no matter how large it might be.

Rotec traced a rune on the ground with his sword, silently muttering the word of Power at the same time. The rune broke, and from it issued an ethereal spirit which lifted him high at great speed. Iradu cauterized his wound with his own sword of fire in midair and roared with pain. Rotec attacked and threw an ethereal spear, but this time his rival saw it and took cover behind his shield. The spear managed to pierce the shield of fire, and lodged in it. The point grazed Iradu's forehead, opening a cut. He roared. As he fell to the ground he created a powerful ball of fire and sent it rolling through the air. Rotec protected himself with his shield, but the impact produced an explosion of fire so brutal that he was hurled backwards towards the ground.

Iradu saw that Rotec was trying to keep his balance as he fell at great speed. He seized his opportunity. He conjured and threw a fiery meteorite, consuming a great part of his reserve of Power in this risky maneuver. Rotec managed to break his fall by conjuring a new spirit to hold him, avoiding the impact against the ground. He looked up at Iradu and saw the flaming meteorite falling dizzyingly towards him. With the greatest urgency he managed to create a protective prism of ether an instant before he was hit. The tremendous impact of the meteorite and the ensuing explosion propelled him to the ground at high velocity. He hit the sand with a terrific impact and ended up half-buried.

Breaking his fall with a couple of fiery missiles against the ground, Iradu descended with his eyes fixed on Rotec. A couple of feet from the ground he let himself drop. He tensed and headed for his opponent, skating on fire. As he gained momentum the fire surrounded him, turning his body into a huge fiery ball. Rotec stood up unsteadily. The protective prism around him had saved him from the explosion, but not from the terrible impact against the ground. His ears and mouth were bleeding. Stunned, he tried to defend himself, and raised his shield. Iradu crashed into him with all the force of his flaming body and the momentum of the fire. Rotec was thrown backwards amid flames after the vicious blow, and was left lying on the sand. He did not get up.

Asu raised his arms to the sky and spoke a long utterance of Power. The sky above Adamis turned a reddish-black inferno. There came a deafening blast, as if a hundred thunderbolts had struck at once, and fire began to rain down on him. Everything was now burning in devastating flames: sand, sea, sky. Worry began to take its toll on the prince of Ether;

the barrier was being severely battered, and under this constant rain of heavy fire it would not hold. He had no choice but to counterattack. He concentrated, calculated how much Power he would need and how much he would have left, and slowly pronounced the words.

There came a tremendous explosion of ethereal energy of blinding purity which expanded from Adamis, its center, to the sky, covering the beach, the sea and the sky itself. The ethereal energy made contact with the fire and gradually destroyed it, drowning its voracious essence, until it disappeared.

Asu yelled with rage.

At the other end of the beach, Notaplo ran limping towards the arcane building. Panting, he urged the others: “Come on, quickly, to the portal!”

Urda, Yosane and Idana ran ahead. Kyra and Ikai brought up the rear, helping Notaplo. They were running in desperation, watching the sky and sand behind them, where the devastating combat between the Gods was taking place.

“Come on, we have to get out of here!” Ikai urged them.

Urda, Yosane and Idana reached the Portal. They turned, encouraging Kyra and Ikai, who were now carrying Notaplo by the arms, with his feet off the ground.

“Hurry!” Yosane called. “You’re nearly there!”

Ikai and Kyra arrived, panting, and let Notaplo down. He fell to his knees on the sand, and Idana helped him to his feet.

Kyra looked at the building in front of her. They had made it! But she noticed something odd by the door, a movement in the blackness of the wall itself. She wrinkled her nose in puzzlement. And from the blackness surged a shadow, as if it had left the black marble and come to life. From it came Oskas.

“Careful!” Kyra cried in warning.

Oskas threw himself on Notaplo in a flash, with both dark daggers in his hands, searching for the Erudite’s neck. Notaplo, wide-eyed, murmured a word. The daggers struck at neck level but found the protective shield, and the Erudite fell backwards.

“Damn barrier!” whispered Oskas under his Helmet of Void. “But it won’t save you again!”

He lunged at Notaplo at an inhuman speed and struck his chest again and again. Notaplo cried out in pain; his barrier had fallen and he was wounded. Kyra and Ikai jumped on Oskas in defense of the old God. The three of them rolled on the ground. Ikai attacked with his throwing knife, but Oskas' daggers easily deflected his attack. Kyra grabbed at the Master-Spy's legs to bring him down, but she was hit hard by a knee in her face, which left her lying stunned on the sand. Ikai attacked again, but this time he took a lightning cut in his forearm and lost his knife, which fell to the ground. He was left defenseless. His rival was a much better fighter than he was himself, better than anyone in fact, a true master of combat. Oskas came forward to finish him off. Ikai waited for the coup de grâce, with his eyes fixed on the deathly daggers. But Urda appeared behind Oskas and held him in a strong bear-hug. Oskas tried to writhe free, but Urda's strength held him fast. Ikai gave a kick, and one dagger flew out of his hands. The Master-Spy thrust his head back and broke Urda's nose. Then he kicked her right shin with his heel, so that the pain made her slacken her pressure. Oskas freed one arm and brought her down with a blow to her temple with his elbow.

Ikai threw himself at Oskas and grabbed his wrist in an attempt to take his other dagger. With a devilish move Oskas held his arm, brought his hip round and sent him flying over his body. He fell at the Master-Spy's feet. His back hit the ground hard, and he was left helpless. Oskas put his knee on his chest, pressing so that he could not breathe, and slowly placed the dagger on his neck.

Death was coming early to claim Ikai. He looked at himself in the Helmet of Void, but his face was not reflected on the polished mirror surface.

"Time to die, slave," came Oskas' distant voice from under the helmet. "You should never have meddled in my Lord and Master's business. I must kill the Erudite, and so I will, because I am a loyal servant of my Lord's."

Ikai was not afraid. He had done what he had to. He took his last breath of air and looked at the visor.

"We serve the House of Aureb," said Oskas, reciting his sinister creed. "We serve in secret."

"Ikai, no! No!" Kyra shouted in desperation, with all the power of her lungs.

Oskas saw Ikai’s strange eyes and hesitated.

Ikai noticed that something strange was happening. He was not being killed.

“Ikai!” Kyra shouted again. She found her brother’s knife in the sand and threw it against Oskas, with all her heart.

The knife caught him in the side of his neck.

The Master-Spy put his hand to the wound. He murmured several words, and a black mist enveloped him. With a breath of sea breeze the mist vanished, and with it so did Oskas.

Ikai blew out air and got slowly to his feet. He looked at his sister and smiled gratefully. He sighed. He had done the impossible to save her, and in the end she had been the one who had saved him. Life was full of surprises and lessons, and this was one he would remember forever. He turned to watch the ongoing battle between the two Gods in the middle of the beach.

Iradu was on top of Rotec. Adamis’ Champion, beaten, was dying. Iradu raised his fiery sword to kill him. Rotec saluted him. He had been defeated and would die with honor. Iradu returned the salute.

You fought with honor and you die with honor. May Mother Nature take you into her womb, Champion of the House of Eret, he said, and severed his head with a swift stroke.

Adamis felt something was wrong and looked towards his Champion. His heart broke at seeing Rotec die; his friend and protector.

Asu cried out in triumph. *You fill me with pride, Iradu, you fill the House of Aureb with pride!*

Iradu saluted his Lord with a nod.

Overcome with pride and feeling himself to be invincible, Asu turned towards the slaves beside the portal.

That slave is mine! Mine! By right! he yelled in fury. In a frenzy he attacked Adamis, unleashing a storm of fiery meteorites on him.

Adamis guarded himself and reinforced his protective sphere. He was very much weakened by the tremendous punishment he had received, and barely had Power left in his reserve. He bore the first physical impacts of the meteorites, followed by the deafening fiery blasts, but the punishment was too much−the whole beach was devastated by the explosions −and fell wounded, unable to rise.

Asu raised his fist to the sky in triumph, then turned to Yosane. *Slave! You are mine! You belong to me! Come back to me, or else you will pay!*

Yosane glared at him undaunted, with courage in her heart. She clenched her fists and answered: “Never! Never again!”

Possessed by his own wrath, Asu lost control of himself. He wanted to use his Power, but he had used it all up in his furious attack against Adamis. Drawing Power from his weakened protective sphere, he launched an arrow of lava at Yosane.

The fiery missile sent by Asu crossed the sky at lightning speed, as if he had fired it from a giant bow, and searched for Yosane’s chest.

“Look out!” cried Kyra, waving her arm at the missile.

Idana saw it and ran in front of Yosane, to protect her with her own body.

Ikai too threw himself on Yosane.

The fiery missile caught Idana in the shoulder and went through her. Yosane received it in her chest an instant before Ikai knocked her forward. The three of them rolled on the sand.

Kyra hurried to them and saw Idana writhing with pain from the burning wound in her shoulder. And then she saw the wound in Yosane’s chest. The fiery arrow had pierced her through and buried itself in the sand.

“Noooooooo!” Kyra cried in despair.

Beside herself, she tried to bring her back, but Yosane had died on impact. Her small body had been run through by the lethal arrow of fire. Kyra turned desperately to Ikai. Her brother bent his head.

“Notaplo, save her!”

The God-Erudite, shook his head slowly.

She is gone. There is nothing I can do. I am deeply sorry.

Kyra, kneeling, held her friend’s head on her lap.

“Don’t leave, don’t!” she pleaded. Her soul was drowning in a sea of pain and sorrow. “Survive and escape…” she whispered, bathing her friend’s gentle face with the tears her soul was weeping.

Ikai went to Idana and helped her. He improvised a bandage by tearing a piece off his tunic. Idana was crying with sorrow and pain.

“To hell with you! You damn soulless Gods! You’ll pay for this! I swear by Mother Sea I won’t rest until I see you all on your knees!” Kyra

cried to the heavens, her heart unable to bear such injustice.

At that moment Adamis emerged from the water. He had burns on his shoulder, leg and side. His face betrayed intense pain, and his head was bleeding. He saw his chance and acted immediately. He still had a trace of Power left, and launched an ethereal javelin at Asu's heart. The Prince of Fire, overwhelmed by a rage which bordered on insanity, did not see the javelin until it penetrated his weakened defense. He reacted. With a swift movement of his fiery sword he deflected the trajectory of the missile an instant too late. The javelin entered his shoulder and lodged there, piercing his body two finger-spans from his neck.

Asu took two steps back, eyes glaring wide. *No! It cannot be!* he shouted, and fell backwards on to the sand.

My Lord! cried Iradu, and hastened towards his Prince.

From the upper part of the beach there came a shout.

Enough! Everyone stop! came the powerful thought of Lord Woz. *There will be no more bloodshed in the domains of my House!*

They all turned to him.

Ignore him! Kill Adamis! Lord Asu ordered Iradu, with a trickle of dark blood at the corner of his mouth, before the blackness took him.

Iradu nodded to his Lord and took a step towards Adamis.

Stop right there, I said, or it will be your life! Lord Woz commanded him.

Lord Asu's Champion turned in defiance towards the hill. He saw that Lord Woz was accompanied not only by his servants but also by twenty or so God-Warriors of the House of Hila.

Iradu's gaze turned to Adamis. *My Lord has ordered me to kill you, and as his Champion it is my obligation. But it will not be today.* He looked hard at Lord Woz, then turned to Adamis and saluted him with a nod.

Adamis understood, and nodded in return.

Neither of you is to leave this beach. I will not allow my House to suffer retaliation for this bloodshed. I shall alert your Houses and the Council.

I request a Healer for my Lord, said Iradu, with a wave towards Lord Asu.

You shall have it.

Adamis contemplated the desolate scene beside the portal. *Let the slaves leave,* he told Lord Woz.

I have no interest in them. The living may leave…

Adamis saluted him and walked to the portal. *Notaplo, are you badly hurt?*

I will live, my Lord, not much longer but I shall live, the old Erudite said. He was pressing his hand down on his wound.

Kyra was weeping beside Yosane's body. Adamis knelt at her side and stroked her hair. *You must leave, now.*

Kyra turned towards the Prince. "Why, Adamis? Why her? She never did anything wrong. She was intelligent, good, the best friend you could have. A gentle soul, who wouldn't have harmed anyone. Tell me, why did she have to die? To satisfy the egos of a few selfish, ruthless Gods?"

Adamis bent his head. His shame was so obvious there was no way he could hide it. *I will never be able to repair the injustices and the terrible suffering which my people have caused, I know. And believe me, I am truly sorry. But now I beg you to listen. You must leave. Seek safety. They will arrive soon, and then I will not be able to save you.*

"He's right," Ikai put in. "We must get away while we still have the chance."

"That's what Yosane would have wanted," he said turning to Idana, trying to cheer her up.

Get into the portal, Adamis urged them.

Urda, Idana and Ikai went in.

Finally, Kyra joined them. Adamis came close to her and took her hand. *I know that now you hate me even more than before, but I want you to know that all this death and destruction is not me, it is not what I want. Knowing you has changed me, has opened my eyes. You have made me see things as they should be seen, in their true nature. You have turned my world inside out, and for that I thank you, for waking me up from this reverie in which we live, believing ourselves to have rights over other beings, over the world. Rights we do not have, nor should we ever have. Not only that, but you have awakened feelings in me, feelings so strong and*

beautiful, which I had never felt before. For all this I thank you. It has been an honor to meet you, Kyra of the Senoca. I shall never forget you.

On the palm of her hand he put a crystalline disc with an enormous golden nugget in the center. Kyra stared at it in surprise.

You will need it, he said with a wink. Then he looked at Ikai and went on: *I am going to send you to a secret portal on the continent. It is not watched; only a few of my House know about it. From there you will be able to go wherever you wish. It is not too far from your land. Be careful. Take care of your sister, she is someone very special.*

Ikai nodded. “Thank you… for everything.”

With a few words of Power Adamis activated the portal, and it began to shine.

Kyra looked at the Prince and reached out her hand. “Will I ever see you again?”

Adamis smiled. *Maybe one day.*

And the portal carried them away.

33

Dawn was beginning to break. The cool of early morning greeted him with its chill embrace, and Ikai wrapped his dark hooded cloak closer around him. From the hill he looked down on the fields, now barren, which he knew so well, and remembered how happy he had been there once, long ago, working from sunrise to sunset. He gazed down at the Ring on his wrist with the symbol of the Hunters, and for a moment found himself wishing it were that of a peasant again. Once he had been happy there, in spite of all the misery, in spite of the hunger: planting wheat, watching it grow, caring for it as it ripened in the sun... He let out a sigh. He would miss the wheat-fields swaying in the gentle caress of the southeast wind.

“It’s time,” Kyra said, her gaze fixed on the small farm in the distance.

He smiled lovingly at his sister. She had changed. He could see it in her gaze; it was deeper now. Pain had made her grow up fast: her indomitable, ardent spirit was intact, her sense of justice and of what was right was stronger, if possible, but her way of thinking and acting was quieter now. He recognized a new maturity in her, a consequence of the experience of suffering which had marked her forever. Marked her, and everyone else. He could still not believe they had managed to escape from the Eternal City alive.

He sighed as he remembered. Just as Adamis had told them, the portal had led them to a secret underground temple. He shook his head. The Gods had hidden temples all over the continent… To open the sealed doors and reach the outside they had had to use the disc Adamis had given Kyra. It had Power, and had opened doors for them until they reached the surface. Once outside, he had had no trouble finding his direction. The possible presence of a group of Hunters had worried him, but he had not found any trace of one. They must have suspended the search, because they did not usually risk spending so many days on a hunt outside the Boundary. Moving as fast as they could, they had reached it in a week, and when they did so they discovered something surprising. The Rings belonging to Kyra, Idana and Urda, which had been manipulated by the Eyes-of-the-God

before crossing the Boundary when they were taken prisoner, allowed them to cross the barrier of the Gods. Once inside they had hidden, and Ikai had gone in search of help.

And now, at last, he and Kyra were very near their home.

“On we go, then,” he told his sister. “But we’d better be careful.”

Kyra nodded, and drew her two throwing daggers. Ikai drew his sword and dagger. *Protect us, Oxatsi.*

The door of the farm was barred from the inside. Ikai peered through the shutters while Kyra secured the back of the building.

“Clear,” she whispered from where she was crouching by the corner.

“The Arkens are inside,” he whispered as he checked the perimeter. “I can make out four of them. There’s no trace of Hunters or Enforcers.”

“Shall we risk it?” she asked anxiously.

He considered, calculating the risks. They had been hiding in the hills, spying on the farm, for two days, and had noticed nothing abnormal. They had to risk it.

“Let’s go,” he said, and winked at her reassuringly.

They crouched on either side of the door, weapons at the ready, and waited. After a while the door opened and Colem, the father, came out to work, as he did every dawn. Kyra rose like lightning and held her dagger to his throat.

“Shhhh,” she whispered in his ear.

Ikai took a quick look inside. Everything seemed normal. He slipped inside and remained crouching in the middle of the common room with the fireplace behind him. Telmas and Volte, Colem’s two sons, stared at him, their eyes wide with fear. Ulma, Colem’s wife, dropped a bowl on the kitchen floor.

“By Oxatsi!” she cried in terror.

Ikai, all his senses alert, glanced round the interior of the small farm and felt no danger. He stood up slowly.

“Enforcers? Hunters?”

Telmas and Volte hastened to shake their heads.

“It’s only us!” said Ulma. “Don’t hurt us, please. We have nothing.”

Ikai pushed his hood back, revealing his face so they would recognize him.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Don’t worry.”

Ulma, Telmas and Volte relaxed with sighs of relief when they recognized their neighbor.

“Ikai!” a woman at the back cried.

The young man looked, and recognized her instantly.

“Mother!”

Solma came over to her son, limping, and gathered him in her arms with all her love.

“Ikai, my son, you’re back!” she cried, sobbing.

Solma drew back and held him at arms’ length. She looked at him from head to foot. There were tears of joy in her eyes.

“Are you all right, my son? You’re so thin, and you look… older…”

“Yes, Mother, I’m all right,” Ikai said, and smiled broadly. All the love in his heart showed on his face.

“I’ve spent so many sleepless nights thinking I’d sent you to certain death… regretting…”

“No, Mother, you did the right thing. You made me promise I wouldn’t rest till I brought her back, promise I’d do whatever I had to.”

Solma gazed into her son’s eyes, and he saw the fear in them, fear that he had failed. Before she could ask, Kyra came in through the door.

Solma’s eyes widened, and for a moment she was in a state of shock. Her mouth hung open, and the words stuck in her throat.

Then with a shriek of joy she cried: “Kyra! My daughter!”

“Mamma!” Kyra fell into her mother’s arms.

Mother and daughter fused into a close embrace and burst into tears of happiness.

“I can’t believe it! My daughter! My little one!”

Kyra held on to her mother as though if she let her go she might lose her forever.

Solma kissed her forehead and stroked her hair. “My darling girl! I thought I’d lost you forever…”

“I’m here, mamma, it’s all over.”

They stayed locked in one another’s arms, freeing their souls from fear and anguish, letting joy and love take their place.

Solma reached out and drew Ikai to her. “You did it, Ikai. You did it!”

When he smiled, his eyes were moist and his throat sore from holding back his tears of happiness. “I gave you my word, Mother.”

She looked at him gratefully, with infinite love and pride. “With the help of Mother Sea and Father Moon, we did it,” said Kyra.

For a moment, all the evil in the world vanished and was replaced by the complete happiness of a family reunited after so much suffering.

But reality returned, no matter how they might wish it otherwise. Ikai cleared his throat and sighed. “We must leave. We’re not safe here. It’s the first place they’ll look for us.”

Solma looked at her son and dried her tears. “Will they come for us?”

He nodded. “It’s a question of time. There’ll be a direct order from the Eternal City. The Enforcers and Hunters won’t rest until they catch us.”

“We have to leave and find safety,” Kyra said. “If we leave now, we’ll still have a chance.”

Solma nodded in acceptance.

“We’ll prepare you something for the journey,” Ulma said.

Ikai turned towards the door, where Colem was watching them. “Thank you, but you must come with us.”

Colem’s face shadowed. “Come with you… why? I don’t understand…”

Kyra went to Ulma and took her arm firmly. She looked into her eyes and said:

“When they come, they’ll interrogate you, and they won’t accept *I don’t know* for an answer… They’ll torture you and then kill you once they see you can’t offer them the answers they’re looking for.”

The color drained from Ulma’s face. The good woman turned to her two sons, who were listening with worry in their eyes.

“Kyra’s right,” Ikai said. “You can’t stay here. I’m so sorry…”

“But where do we go?” Ulma asked anxiously. “They’ll find us… they always find the Pariahs…”

“No, they won’t find us,” he assured them.

“Because we’re going to the other side of the Boundary,” Kyra said.

Colem looked at Ulma, and she in turn looked at their sons. “We’re coming with you,” she said.

Ikai nodded. “Good. Now we have a lot of work to do and very little time. Get all your clothes, tools, anything you’ve ever used, and put it all inside the house. We have to stop the Hunters locating us.”

Two hours later the seven fugitives, with satchels on their backs, reached the top of the hill. They were leaving behind two great columns of black smoke between the fields. Both farms were burning.

It was already midmorning, several days later, and the sun was shining brightly when Ikai came back from his scouting. He came close to the cave entrance and hooted three times.

Kyra appeared, with her throwing daggers at the ready. “Everything all right?”

He winked at her. “Everything quiet on the east.”

“Everything quiet on the south and west,” came a woman’s voice as she came out of the shadows of the forest.

Brother and sister watched Albana approach, bow in hand, with her stealthy step. Ikai greeted the cat-like brunette with a nod. He was still not altogether used to having her as an ally, but he was glad she was with them.

“For the moment we’re safe,” he said, “but we should leave as soon as we can.”

“We won’t be safe for long… they must already be searching for us… and if not us, for sure they’ll be looking for *them*.” She nodded towards the interior of the cave.

“How much longer is it going to take?” Ikai said uneasily. “They’ve been in there for days! What’s happening?”

“It’ll take as long as it takes,” another female voice said behind him.

They turned towards the cave and saw Liriana, armed to the teeth, coming out to greet them with a smile. When Ikai had gone for help, he had called on Gedrel and found Liriana and Albana with him.

“And he doesn’t want anyone to witness what he’s doing,” Liriana said. “There are some secrets that have to be kept as what they are: secret.”

Ikai wrinkled his nose. “Tell your boyfriend to hurry up. We have to cross the Boundary, and every day that goes by the risk increases. They’ll find this hiding place, no matter how remote it may be.” He was oddly upset at seeing her.

“Maruk… is doing all he can, but it’s a slow process, you know that. Besides, he was only supposed to alter Solma’s Ring so she could escape, but you’ve brought half the village. We’re risking a lot over this, not just you. I don’t need to remind you, Maruk is vital for Gedrel’s plans. If he’s captured…”

“I know, I know,” Ikai said. He could not take his gaze from Liriana’s turquoise eyes.

“We couldn’t leave them behind,” Kyra put in. “Anyone who’s had contact with us is in danger.”

Liriana looked at the two siblings and sighed. “You’re still in time. Stay, join us, join the cause, the fight. Now more than ever we need you for what you represent, for what you are, for what we’ve lived through and learnt from the Gods. Gedrel doesn’t wish for anything else… I don’t wish for anything else myself.”

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to stay and fight with you all, against those soulless monsters,” Kyra said. “There’s nothing I’d like more than top lunge these daggers into the sick heart of the first God I come upon, and then claim justice.” There was burning rage in her voice.

Ikai turned and sought to calm her with his gaze. “Kyra…”

She sighed deeply. “But this isn’t the time for that… I must get my mother to safety, and my friends too.”

Idana and Urda came out of the cave, greeted her and joined in the conversation.

“The invitation to join the cause: I’m extending it to everyone.”

Idana and Urda exchanged glances. “We’ve already talked about it. We’re going wherever Kyra goes.”

“Is there no way of convincing you to stay with me?” Liriana asked. Her gaze was fixed on Ikai.

Kyra, Idana and Urda shook their heads.

“Albana?”

The brunette watched the horizon for an instant, and then spoke. “Thanks for the offer, Liriana. I genuinely appreciate it a lot after all we’ve been through. But I’m going with Kyra and Ikai too. I’ll help them settle and form a colony outside the Boundary. They need me, and it’s an honor to be allowed to come with them. It’s a debt I have to pay.”

Liriana nodded. “I understand. Where will you go?”

“We’ll go back to where we belong, to Mother Sea,” Kyra said.

Albana looked back towards the Boundary behind them. “Out there I know of a place where we can hide and settle,” Albana said. “It’s a wonderful place: a protected cove, well-hidden and out of the way. A long way from the Gods and their Enforcers. We’ll be safe there. I’ve always wanted to escape there and disappear, but I never thought it would be possible.”

Ikai took a step towards Liriana. “Come with us, Liriana. Your life’s in danger here. You’re a Pariah, with the Gods pursuing you. They’ll search for you and Maruk. They won’t stop till they catch you. If you come with us, you’ll have a chance. If you stay with Gedrel you’ll be caught. Come with us, please.”

Liriana gazed at him tenderly. “Thank you, Ikai, from the bottom of my heart. But my place is here, with Maruk, with Gedrel, with our enslaved people. I’ll fight. And if I fall, it’ll be for freedom.”

“Well said!” Kyra cried.

At that moment the Arkens and Solma appeared, with Maruk behind them.

“It’s done,” he said.

With dawn came the last embraces and farewells. Tears ran down Liriana’s face, though she tried without success to hold them back. Kyra crossed first, with a firm step. The Boundary received her and let her pass.

Painful spasms overcame her as she went through the translucent barrier. She fell to the ground amid convulsions and fainted. Idana and Urda followed. The rest waited until they had recovered. When they were ready, the four members of the Arken family crossed. Ikai helped his mother to cross. Albana hugged Liriana, took her leave, and crossed too.

Ikai looked at Liriana and smiled. “Good luck, Captain!”

Liriana smiled back. “Good luck, Hunter!”

He crossed the Boundary.

Ikai had accomplished what he had set out to do: he had rescued his sister and reunited his family. But in so doing, something bigger, much more transcendental had been achieved: the first group of Senoca escaped on that day from the claws of the Golden Gods, to form the first colony of free people, returning to Mother Sea after a thousand years of slavery.

---END-BOOK 1--

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REBELLION
Pedro Urvi

REBELLION

Pedro Urvi

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To my father, my number one fan, always.

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Prologue

Rumors tell that the unthinkable has happened, that a group of Senoca has managed to escape from the Eternal City, evading the Gods in their own dwelling. Seven are the Heroes who have seen the faces of the Gods and escaped from their Power.

The breezes of the east tell that the Heroes can cross the Boundary. That they can free the Senoca people of their Rings.

The murmur of the great River tells that the Heroes have created a Shelter for the Senoca outside the Boundary, where they live free, in safety, beside Oxatsi our Mother Sea.

The crackling of the bonfires tells that a rebellion is under way, led by the Heroes. The seed of the rebellion has been sown and now grows strongly. That all the Senoca people must join the rebels.

The stars of heaven tell that there is hope for the Senoca. That they must fight for freedom. That they must follow the Heroes to rebellion.

Chapter 1

“Faster, by Oxatsi!”

Liriana’s muffled urgency broke the silence of the night. Frightened, a white owl flew away from the edge of the forest. Wary footsteps sounded through the tall grass, leaving behind the shelter of the fir thicket.

“Come on, don’t lag behind!”

This time the warning was tinged with the urgency of fear. The footsteps sped up until they turned into a run. Dull moans and whines, hushed by the fear of imminent danger, were whispered along the breeze through the open land. Bent bodies went on, bathed by the silver light of a full moon.

Liriana shook her head. *I have a very bad feeling about this.*

Appearing suddenly out of the depths of the forest they had just left behind, a beam of white light rent the darkness of the night. It reached the rear of the group. The arcane beam shone on the thirty-odd fugitives, staring with terrified eyes at the light which had revealed them.

“Falcon Eye! Hunters!” Liriana shouted. She turned around and looked to see where the threat was coming from. She could not see them – it was too dark for that – but she knew the damned Hunters would soon appear. Her stomach lurched. *We’ve been discovered, but how? This is the safest route. It’s never been compromised.* Nervously she passed her hand over her head, expecting to feel her short strong blond hair, but instead she met the rough touch of the scarf she wore, covering it, tied with a knot at the back of her neck. She remembered then that she was dressed for the mission. She put her hand to her mouth, where she found a second scarf of the same dark blue, covering the lower part of her face. She rearranged it so only her eyes could be seen. That way nobody would recognize her. A necessary precaution, as Regent Sesmok had put a price on their heads: a very high price, which many would be happy enough to pay. She tried to think of some means of escape. The situation was getting desperate and fleeing from

the Hunters was impossible: even more so if she was guiding a group of unfortunate refugees.

A long, threatening whistle reached her ears. She narrowed her eyes and caught a metallic gleam in the darkness of the sky. Pure instinct made her duck. Two arrows brushed past her head and embedded themselves in the back of the man in front of her. He fell dead with a moan of surprise and pain.

“Run for your lives! Run!” she shouted now, at the top of her voice. They had been discovered, and the wariness they had kept up during their flight for more than two weeks was now pointless. Now only the options of running or dying remained. She rearranged the bow she carried across her back, together with her quiver, so they would not hamper her, and raced on.

Panic took over the group. Men, women and children dropped the scanty belongings they were carrying and ran as if a pack of wild animals were after them. And unfortunately, that was exactly what it was: a pack of man-hunters.

Romen pointed at the edge of the forest behind them. “They’re right on top of us!” he said. Liriana looked at her lieutenant. His face was hidden, like hers, and there was fear in his blue eyes. She followed his pointing finger and saw four Hunters at the fore. *Damn, they’re here already!* She watched them carefully for a brief moment. They wore brown, with reinforced leather armor, and were carrying swords and short bows. There was no doubt about it, they were Hunters.

“Run to the front and guide them. Make them ford the river. If they catch us before we cross, we’re lost.”

Romen nodded and ran off like lightning.

The Hunters nocked their arrows and aimed.

Liriana turned and ran. Four lethal hisses followed her. Her legs pumped with all the power anguish could inject into them, trying to avoid the death which would begin to rain upon her in an instant from the blackness of the sky. The first arrow buried itself in the ground to her right. The second grazed her arm. Where the other two fell she did not see.

Damn! she thought, trying to control the fear creeping up her throat.

A woman tripped and fell heavily to the ground. The little girl running beside her turned to help, but the woman was too heavy for her to lift.

Liriana reached them, and the terror in the little girl's face was so obvious that for a moment she thought she was in a nightmare. With a sharp pull she lifted the mother up. Blood was running down her cheek from a cut on her forehead.

"She's all right, don't worry," she assured the little girl with a brief smile, trying to soothe her. "Now, run!"

The three women broke into a run, with Liriana helping the woman so that she would not trip again. In the midst of the surrounding darkness, with only the light of the moon to rely on, fleeing was a hazardous business. Ahead of them the group was running in the grip of terror, following Romen to the river. Several tripped, others lost their footing or slipped on the damp grass and fell on their faces. Helped by family and friends they got up immediately and went on, knowing that death would reach them if they did not keep running.

They finally got to the river. Romen showed them how to make a human chain to ford the shallowest stretch between the two banks. Without wasting any time he went into the water, taking with him the first members of the chain, until this stretched across the whole width of the river. The current was strong and treacherous, if anyone lost their footing they would be dragged away by the water. One by one they began to cross, holding on to the others in the chain with trembling arms, using them to cross to the other side.

"Come on! Hurry up!" Liriana urged them. She was scanning the flat stretch of land behind her with narrowed eyes, searching for a glimpse of their pursuers. She could not see them, but a knot in her stomach assured her they were getting closer. Soon they would catch up with them: they were hunters of men, and the fleeing group their prey. She went down the hill to the muddy riverbank and joined the last ones to make the crossing. She looked for Romen and saw that he was helping the ones who reached the other shore, with his usual energy and determination.

We're almost there, we made it, she encouraged herself. She started to cross the river. She was the last.

The deadly hisses came again, with their ominous melody. She crouched, but an instant too late. An arrow grazed her shoulder. She lost her footing and had to dig one knee into the ground. The cold water hit her face like an icy hammer, and she lost her balance. The current was going to carry

her away. A strong hand held her arm, and she managed to recover. She looked at her savior; it was Komas the baker, who smiled at her. There came a dull thud, and Komas' smile turned into a grimace. He tried to say something but failed; blood came out of his mouth. Liriana saw an arrow buried in the good man's neck. He fell, and the current carried him away. Behind him three other men met the same fate. Shaken, she watched the bodies floating downriver.

Romen waved his arms to attract her attention. "Liriana!" he shouted. "Hurry!"

Her companion's gestures brought her out of her daze. She shook her head, then without looking back forded the river until she reached him. She took Romen's hand, and with a strong tug he helped her out. Three arrows landed in the spot where she had stood only a moment before. *By a hair's-breadth!* she gasped.

"Let's get out of here! Follow me!" she cried, and raced on.

Romen and the other survivors followed her quickly. She went on running until her eyes found what she knew was waiting nearby. On the ground she made out a golden, almost translucent line, which became more solid as she watched it. It was the Boundary, the barrier of the Gods. She reached it and stopped at a prudent distance, without crossing it. She reached out her left arm. The Ring gave a stinging buzz, and her arm began to shake uncontrollably. *One day we'll break down this barrier that holds our people prisoner. Unfortunately, that day hasn't yet come.*

Romen came to stand beside her. "Shall we cross?" he asked.

She turned to face the thirty-odd frightened faces watching her in a semi-circle, faces of slaves, of good people, hard workers, honest, brave-hearted yet with their souls caged: men, women and children, families, waiting for her to show them the way to a better life, to hope, to freedom. She had to lead them to a safe place, where they would be slaves no longer, where they would be able to live in peace and freedom, with other brothers like them who had also been set free. That is, if they managed to survive.

"Cross," she ordered, trying to hide the doubt in her voice.

Romen nodded. Pointing at a dozen people in the front row, he motioned them to cross the barrier. Those selected stepped forward with fear, hollow-eyed, their steps unsure. It was not to be wondered at. No man could cross

the limits established by the Gods. Anyone who tried would suffer a horrible death. They all knew it. And that was exactly what they were being asked to do.

“Don’t be afraid, nothing will happen to you. You know your Rings have been altered so you can cross,” Romen explained.

The unfortunate men and women exchanged frightened looks. Then they turned to Liriana.

“Go ahead! Trust!” she said confidently.

They put their left arms forward, trying to control their tremors, until they reached the forbidden strip. The Rings crossed the barrier and gave off a silver gleam. They were allowed to pass. Spasms of pain whipped at them as they crossed the barrier, and they fell to the ground in uncontrollable convulsions. Pain burst out in their minds, and they fainted. When they saw this, the remaining fugitives stepped back with cries of terror.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Romen said. “They’ve crossed, and they’re alive. They’ll recover presently.”

But the fear of the Gods and their obscure Power was too much, and the group did not move.

“Come on!” Liriana ordered them. “There’s no time to lose!”

Romen stepped in at this point. He took hold of the undecided group and made them cross. As for the few who were still reluctant, he forced them to cross over. Then he went back to Liriana.

“That’s done.”

“Thanks, Romen. Now you cross.”

There was worry in his face. “What about you?” he asked.

“I’ll delay them,” she said, and waved in the direction of the river.

He pointed to her shoulder. “But you can’t, you’re wounded.”

“It’s just a scratch.”

Romen sighed and obeyed. She grunted with pain.

“We don’t have much of a head start,” she explained. “If we both cross they’ll catch us. And what’s worse, we’ll be helpless, unconscious.”

“Let me be the one to delay them. You have to cross.”

“Nobody’s going to sacrifice themselves for me. I’m in command, I’m the leader, it’s my responsibility.”

“Liriana, please, let me…”

“There’s no time for arguments. I’ve given you a direct order: cross over, then when you wake up and recover from the noxious effect, guide them. Get them to safety. I’m counting on you. Don’t fail them. We can’t let them die. They’ve put their trust in us, in the resistance, and we have to save them.”

“I won’t fail,” Romen told her, and crossed over. He fell to the ground amid convulsions and lost consciousness.

For a moment Liriana considered the group lying on the grass. They were on the other side of the Boundary. They had crossed over, had almost reached freedom. *So near and so far at the same time!* Unfortunately the Hunters would arrive at any moment and would kill them mercilessly before they had time to recover and escape.

And she could not let that happen. *I must make sure they reach safety!*

She grabbed her bow and ran to hide behind a nearby oak tree. She looked to the East where there was an opening in the trees, nocked an arrow and watched the river in the gully. Soon they would arrive there.

She waited.

The first of the Hunters appeared on the opposite bank. In the light of the moon she could make out his silhouette, although she could not distinguish his features. He crouched, searching for the group’s trail, and found it easily. He went to the spot where they had crossed the river.

“Bloody hounds!” Liriana cursed to herself. The Hunter made a sign, and a second Hunter came over to him. They watched the shore briefly. She prayed to the father-god Girlai they would not see her. They came to a decision and began to cross.

She aimed at the one in the lead, not letting her nerves get the better of her, inhaled deeply and held her breath. She waited until the man had reached the middle of the river, breathed out and let the arrow fly. It took him in the chest. The Hunter put his hand to the arrow in surprise, looked ahead trying to see where the attack had come from and fell sideways. His companion tried to help him, but the wild water carried him away. Liriana nocked another arrow. The Hunter crouched and moved forward almost on

his knees, trying not to make himself an easy target. She let fly. The arrow grazed the crouching body, but missed.

Damn!

She nocked again and breathed in harshly. Her arm shook, but she kept control of herself. The Hunter had reached the shore and was crawling like a snake through the tall grass; she could barely make him out. She followed his movements, calculated the shot, breathed out and released the arrow. It took him in the right shoulder a moment before he could hide behind a boulder.

She grunted. The shot had not been lethal. She nocked again and aimed at the boulder.

Two arrows buried themselves in the trunk of the oak she was hiding behind. A piece of bark hit her in the face. In a reflex she pulled her head back and protected herself behind the tree.

The two other Hunters must have reached the river already, and they've located me. I can't count on the surprise factor any more. I have to gain more time, or else we're doomed.

With a swift move she poked her head out and shot at the two men beside the river, then hid instantly. Several arrows brushed her head.

This is getting complicated, she sighed, nervously. *But I have to keep them there.*

She tried to repeat the same move, faster this time. An arrow scratched her face. Flinching, she dropped her bow and had to duck at once, her heart pounding. She tried to calm down. It was a tight fit, but this was not the first time. She had to think.

She heard soft footsteps to her left, nocked an arrow and turned, waiting for the Hunter to appear from behind the tree. A silhouette was crawling like a snake through the grass. She let fly, but the Hunter drew back with an agile movement and her arrow buried itself in the ground.

"Drop your bow," came a voice to her right.

Hell! She started to turn.

"Don't even try, or I'll put one through you!"

Slowly, without raising her bow, she looked right. It was the Hunter she had wounded. He was pointing his bow at her.

He’s wounded, perhaps he’ll miss, she thought, and began to move her own bow.

“Do what they tell you,” came another voice on her left. She turned and there was another Hunter on one knee, aiming at her.

She was surrounded. She dropped her bow and raised her arms.

A third Hunter joined the first two, and this was no mere Hunter: he was the leader of the pack.

“On your feet,” he said in a crisp, authoritarian voice.

Liriana obeyed, studying him as she did so. He was not very tall, but was extremely thin, with a long sharp nose. His hair was long and white, tied back in a queue, and his eyes were light brown. She knew who he was: Lonus, the Master Hunter responsible for the Fifth County. His bad reputation preceded him. He was said to be cruel, and to enjoy abusing his privileged position. The Enforcers of the Gods let him act with impunity, and the brute enjoyed inflicting suffering on the poor wretches he came across. She knew the six Master Hunters now. She had spied on them and studied their ways, since they were the enemy, and the more she knew about them, the better the chances of defeating them. In the same way, the less they knew about her organization and activities, the less risk of being captured. Or at least so Gedrel had taught her.

“If I’m not mistaken, and I rarely am, I have a ‘Rebel’ before me. Today’s Hunt has gone well for us.” He smiled ironically.

Liriana looked at him defiantly, but said nothing.

“For months there’ve been rumors of your existence, of the presence of an organized resistance group calling for rebellion against the Regent, and still more outrageously, against the Gods themselves. Something utterly irrational, a madness that can lead only to failure and death. Yet even so, there’s talk of you and your message: whispers and mutterings in taverns and markets, temples and barns. The Regent denies it, he turns a deaf ear. Either he refuses to believe it, or else it doesn’t suit him to: probably both. But we Hunters always keep our ears and eyes open, and in the end the song of treason has reached us. I still can’t believe it, it’s insane. Do you really seek Rebellion? Is it true that you’re beginning to be organized?” He shook his head repeatedly and stared at Liriana with a look of incredulity on his face.

She said nothing, although she would gladly have shouted out a firm *yes*.

The Master Hunter looked her up and down and crossed his bow on his back, arranging it so it would not get in his way when he walked. He thrust his head forward and relaxed his shoulders.

“Do you know who I am?”

She nodded.

“What are you doing in the Fifth County? Where are you heading for?”

His only answer was silence.

“On this side of the river there’s only the forest and… and the Boundary…” Lonus fixed his eyes on Liriana, then looked in the direction of the Boundary. “No, it can’t be. The rumors can’t be true.” He gestured at the blond Hunter, the younger of the two. “Go and follow their tracks. Which way did they go?”

The Hunter left at once. It was not long before he came back at a run. His tense face and his fearful eyes showed that he had found something very strange.

“Sir, they’ve… they’ve… crossed over.”

“That’s not possible! The slaves can’t cross! It’s no more than rumors and lies from that group of foolish rebels! Only we Hunters can do it, by the grace of the Gods!”

“There’s a group of men and women still unconscious on the other side, Master. They’ve crossed…”

“By the Golden Gods! This I have to see with my own eyes!” He started to walk towards the Boundary. “Bring her!” he ordered, and the two Hunters seized her by the arms and dragged her with them.

Lonus reached the Boundary and his wrist began to shake. He stopped less than a pace from it. He looked at the dozen unconscious bodies, then turned his gaze to the bushes beyond.

“Are they alive?”

“Yes, Master, they’re breathing,”

“How is it possible? How have they managed to cross over and stay alive? Where are the others? There were about thirty in the group.” He turned his back on the barrier of the Gods and glared at Liriana. “You’d

better talk. I want to know how you did it, or I swear that neither you nor them" – he pointed behind him – "will live long enough to serve as the public example the Regent is going to make of you."

Liriana felt bile rising in her throat, but she swallowed it. *Keep calm,* she told herself. She looked at the dozen who had not recovered in time to escape. Her eyes searched for Romen, but could not find him… *He's safe, and half the group with him.*

"Uncover her face. I want to see it before I take her eyes out."

Liriana freed herself from the blond Hunter and delivered a tremendous right punch to his nose. He fell to the ground. At once the other hit her on the head hard and knocked her down. She struggled with both Hunters like a lioness, kicking and hitting with all her strength.

"Let me go, you bloody swine!" she shouted, so forcefully that her voice must have been audible for several leagues around. All eyes were on her. The two Hunters managed to subdue her with blows. She ended up lying on her face with her hands and arms held, her body aching, bleeding from the nose and one brow.

And smiling.

Lonus saw her smile, and frowned.

"Why the hell are you smiling? What…?" But he never finished the sentence.

"Now!" a voice sounded behind Lonus, and two figures rose swiftly from among the unconscious bodies of the fugitives.

There was a bright burst of light, and a trembling hand crossed the Boundary behind Lonus. Before he could turn, the hand closed on his bow yanking it away, and with it Lonus, who was hurled backwards. Before the other Hunters could react, their Master was crossing the Boundary backwards. Lonus began to shake violently in the arms of a huge woman, tall as well as massively-built, with mahogany eyes and blonde hair cut to stubble. The young woman held him aloft, preventing him from falling and at the same time using him as a shield. A dagger in her right hand threatened the Master's life.

The two Hunters readied their bows.

"Careful with those bows," said a figure on one knee beside the big woman, holding a loaded bow. "It wouldn't do to let one little slip finish off

your Master’s life.”

The Hunters looked at each other, not knowing which of the two threats to aim at.

Lonus stopped shaking and fainted.

“Your timing… is perfect, my friend,” Liriana said to Kyra with a broad smile from the ground, where the senior of the two Hunters was holding her down with his foot on her neck.

Kyra smiled and turned to her huge companion. “If either of those two makes a move, cut his throat.”

“It’ll be a pleasure,” Urda replied, and pressed the dagger against Lonus’ neck.

Liriana eyed the Hunters. They were nervous, the tension was increasing by the moment and the whole tricky situation might turn into a blood bath in the blink of an eye if they were not careful. Luckily the Hunters were not used to making crucial decisions. That was their Master’s responsibility, and now their Master could not help them.

“Now you’re going to drop your weapons,” Kyra said, sounding authoritative and self-assured, as if she were in full charge of the situation.

“In your dreams,” said the Hunter who had Liriana on the ground

“Make him see his error…”

Urda pressed the blade, and a trickle of blood appeared on Lonus’ neck.

“Wait!” the blond Hunter cried.

“Drop your weapons, or the Master dies. It’s very simple, and it’s not negotiable.”

“No way,” the veteran Hunter said. “If you kill him you’ll die with him, and she’ll be the first.” He pressed his foot down harder on Liriana’s neck.

At the sight of this, Kyra felt rage burning inside her. Without a word she aimed at his chest, then released the string. The arrow flew through the barrier of the Gods. There was a flash, and circles of waves appeared on the translucent surface around the arrow, like those in a lake when you throw a pebble into it. The missile strayed from its course as it crossed the barrier. It reached its target, but struck the Hunter’s thigh instead of his chest. Surprised by the impact, he tripped over Liriana and fell to the ground with

a cry. Kyra stood, spun round and hid behind Urda, back to back. She nocked another arrow.

The younger Hunter tried to get Kyra, but Lonus' body was in the way.

"I'm not going to repeat it. Drop your weapons or I'll tell my little friend to slit his throat. Final warning."

There was a moment of tension. Liriana feared they would not make it. The game might go wrong any moment; the stakes were very high.

The two Hunters exchanged looks. The senior one, with his knee on the ground, assessed the situation for a moment, then finally grimaced and nodded slowly. They lowered their weapons and let them fall to the ground.

Liriana sighed with relief and got to her feet.

"Good choice," Kyra said. Coming out of Urda's shadow, she aimed at the Hunters.

Liriana picked up a bow. "On your knees!" she ordered. Reluctantly, the Hunters obeyed.

"What are we going to do with them?" Kyra asked. "We don't have anything to tie them up with, and we can't let them go free."

"I have an idea," Liriana said. There was a twisted smile on her face and a gleam in her eyes.

Kyra looked at her in puzzlement.

"Hunters, cross the Boundary!"

With the three Hunters lying on the ground, naked and unconscious, the group went into the forest to carry on their flight. Urda led them with Romen bringing up the rear.

Liriana glanced at Kyra from the other side of the barrier.

"That was close…"

"Yes, very close," Kyra said with a wink. "For a moment there I thought we weren't going to make it. That was a good distraction you put up."

"I recognized Urda lying with the others. I knew you'd be near."

“It was the only thing I could think of. We were coming to get you when we found Romen hiding the refugees in the forest, and he told us what had happened.”

Liriana smiled. “Good plan. Pretty risky, but it worked.”

“Ikai will be furious, really furious. He doesn’t want me to take these risks… he doesn’t like me to handle the matter of transporting refugees.”

“He has a point… This time we were very close to not being able to tell him about it, too close… We’ll have to drop this route, it’s not safe anymore. How’s your… brother?” Liriana asked, blushing a little and trying to hide the fact.

“He’s very well. Very busy. The Shelter’s growing, and he doesn’t stop to rest. And every day you send us more refugees.”

Liriana nodded. “I only send those who are condemned by the Gods. Each group we manage to bring to the Shelter safe and sound means that hope grows among our people. The rumors are getting stronger and reaching further all the time. Everybody’s talking about the Seven Heroes, and the story’s spreading from county to county. Soon all the Senocas will know it.”

“It seems like an eternity ago…”

“Yes, but it’s only a year since we escaped from the Eternal City.”

“A pretty intense year.”

“Yes, for all of us.”

Kyra looked thoughtfully at the three Hunters. “We ought to kill them. Sooner or later they’ll hunt us again.”

Liriana shook her head. “It’s time for the rumors to become an open call. They”– she pointed at them – “are witnesses to the fact that we exist, that we can cross the Boundary. The time has come for them to talk about it, to let it be known openly, for the people to have hope. It’s time to come out into the light. It’s time to act.”

“You know you can count on me,” Kyra assured her.

“I know, and we’re deeply grateful.”

“Don’t you want to come and see the Shelter?”

“No, I can’t, but I appreciate the invitation. I’d love to see it, and your brother… and the rest…. But I have too many responsibilities on this side

of the barrier, and I can’t leave them unattended. Gedrel needs me. But don’t worry, Romen will tell me when he comes back.”

Liriana turned around and looked into the night. On the plain, walking slowly towards the river, she could make out a dozen silhouettes.

“It’s time to go our separate ways. They’re coming.”

“The rest of the pack?”

“Yes, they’re coming to look for their Master.”

“Well then, good luck, my friend. Don’t let them capture you.”

Liriana nodded. “I wish you the same, and may Oxatsi be with you.”

Chapter 2

From the highest point of the island Ikai watched the small single-sailed boats coming into the turquoise waters of the sheltered cove. They were returning with the catch of the day, all except the largest, which would not return from out at sea until the end of the week. Watching his fellow countrymen sailing on Mother Sea, Ikai felt a deep pride, and his heart sang.

“The Senoca are back again sailing the seas, after more than a thousand years,” he commented, more to himself than to his companion.

Albana shaded her eyes with her hand to protect them from the evening sun and looked at the tiny boats far below.

“Who could have guessed?” replied the mysterious young woman with jet-black eyes and hair. She looked as if she found it hard to believe.

“You know that we mostly owe it to you, don’t you?”

The young woman looked him in the eyes. “I only helped you settle here, that’s all. I owed it to you… for what happened at the Eternal City… The credit is all yours.”

Ikai glanced around the wonderful place Albana had taken them to after they had left the lands of the Senoca. It was so beautiful it left him breathless. He inhaled the fresh, brine-tasting air and allowed the beauty of the landscape to take possession of his senses. The bare hills which surrounded them were covered with an intense tropical green. Further down began the dense forests between the mountains from whose heights rivers ran down to the lower valleys. Cliffs flanked the entire edge of the great island, protecting those valleys from the winds. But what most impressed Ikai was Mother Sea, who in her grandeur surrounded them completely, turquoise blue as far as the eye could reach, as far as the distant horizon.

Albana smiled at him. “So, what do you think? Was it worth it, climbing up here?”

“It’s awesome… of course it was worth it. From up here you can see the whole island.”

“I’ve tried to show you more than once, but you’re always too busy with the village and the refugees to pay any attention to me,” she said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Don’t say that. You know I’d have loved to explore this place, but I haven’t been able… there’s so much to do… so many needs to meet…”

“Better late than never. You should get to know the environment you live in. It might save your life.”

Ikai gave her a grateful smile. “That’s why I have you. You didn’t tell us you were bringing us to an island. I can’t get used to this dream of a place. It still seems unbelievable that we’re here.”

Albana smiled. “Not surprising, after everything we’ve been through. I told you I’d bring you somewhere wonderful, secluded, far from Gods, Enforcers and corrupt men. Near the sea.”

“Yes, I remember, but I hadn’t imagined it would be such a beautiful place, and much less in the sea itself.”

She smiled. “It’s certainly beautiful. Very beautiful. But it’s not exactly an island, and we must be careful not to forget that.” She bent over and put her bow to one side, then took an arrow from the quiver at her back and with the metal tip drew the shape of a thick horseshoe on the ground. She pointed the tip towards the inner part of the horseshoe, then at the boats approaching.

“The north side, where the cove is, looks onto open sea,” she said. Ikai’s gaze followed her directions. “The east and west sides are protected by the great cliffs,” she went on, pointing with her arrow to the sides of the horseshoe, “and surrounded by the sea in every direction. From there the island is inaccessible.” He listened attentively. This world was still new to him, and he did not know it well. “But the south side” –she pointed at the curve of the horseshoe– “although you can’t see it, is joined to the mainland.” She drew a long parallel line behind the horseshoe.

Ikai turned and gazed behind him at the distant beaches of the continent, the line Albana had drawn.

“By the underwater passage.”

Albana nodded. “That’s right.” With a short line she joined the lower part of her drawing to the coast. “At high tide it disappears under water. But when the tide goes out according to the plans of Father Moon, the rocky passage joining the island to the coast is revealed. We must always watch it, and not let ourselves be carried away by the illusion of being safe in an inaccessible island. If it were discovered, someone or something might reach us through that passage. There are only five hundred paces between us and the coast of the continent.”

“I set the Arkens to watch it. Colem and his sons Telmas and Volte take turns day and night. It’s well covered, don’t worry.”

“Well, I do. There are too many refugees arriving. Each new group puts us in danger, puts this place in danger.”

Ikai nodded slowly. “I know. But I can’t refuse them shelter… they need our help… Gedrel asks us to welcome them, they’re condemned families… If we don’t accept them, they’re doomed.”

“Well, you should refuse them,” Albana said with her characteristic cool objectivity. “One day they’ll betray us, either voluntarily or otherwise, and that’ll be the end of us.”

The cat-like brunette was right, and he knew it, but he could not turn his back on his own people. Besides, Kyra would never accept it. His sister was doing her best to help the refugees and had taken on the job of guiding them to the island. But Albana was right. They would have to take the greatest care, or else her words of warning would turn into reality. The truth was that she was right in many things.

“I haven’t said it in all this time, but I’m grateful… I’m grateful for all your advice… and everything you’re doing to help me… to help us…” he said, a little ashamed, as he gazed at the enigmatic young woman. In all the time they had spent together since their flight, Albana had gradually become essential to the group. In clear contrast to his sister Kyra, who was too impulsive and always followed her heart, which made her end up making wrong decisions, Albana was far cooler and more cerebral. He trusted her with reconnaissance, vigilance and protection. He had also given her the responsibility of teaching the able-bodied refugees to use the bow. The fact was that he counted on her advice in all important matters. She had become the one he trusted, his right hand, on her own merits. He thanked

Oxatsi for granting him this wonderful partner. Distrust and betrayal had been left behind, buried by growing friendship and trust.

Albana smiled wryly. “If I were to let you make all the important decisions, you’d sink this island and everyone on it in less time than a rooster takes to crow.” She gave a taunting laugh.

Ikai burst out laughing at her comment and nodded slowly. “You’re right enough there.”

“You’re doing very well,” she said. “We’re still in once piece.” She elbowed him affectionately. “So far, anyway.”

“Don’t let me go wrong.”

“Don’t you worry,” she said mockingly. “I’ll be your shadow, and every time you put your foot in it I’ll make sure you don’t forget it for days.” She winked at him.

Ikai shook his head, although in his heart he was grateful for her support.

“We’d better go back. I want to see how the fishermen have done and what news they’ve brought.”

“Very well. I’ll let you get on with your chores, but first I’ll race you to the waterfalls. Try not to fall over a cliff!” she said, and ran off like a black panther.

“Wait…” But it was already too late, he would lose again.

With the sun beginning to set in Oxatsi’s lap and its splendor turning an orange-pink which painted the sky with hope, Ikai walked along the narrow wooden jetty. Here he came upon Ilas and his work team, who were strengthening part of the still-unfinished structure. For months they had been working without pause to build modest moorings at the western end of the great bay, but there was still work for weeks. Ikai sighed; there was still so much left to do in the whole island…

He came up to them with a wave. “How’s the work going?”

The five men turned and greeted him at once, bowing their heads in respect. He stopped and looked at them thoughtfully: as slaves, they had

worked on the construction of triremes for the great river. They had been the first refugees to arrive, and were a blessing for him as they knew how to build ships and were expert carpenters, especially old Ilas, who had more than forty years of experience behind him. Ikai had entrusted him with building the fishing boats and the dock and he could not have been happier with the results.

“It’s coming along, Hero of the Senoca, Leader of the Shelter. We hope you’re pleased,” Ilas replied. His voice was grave and respectful.

“Very much so, Ilas. You needn’t address me so formally, you know that,” he added with a frown. He did not like being treated either as a hero or a leader. Both of those things had been simply the results of chance and necessity, not things he had sought or wished for. Particularly the latter.

“But you’re one of the Seven Heroes,” Ilas said. “You lead us, we owe you our freedom. We must show you the respect you deserve.” The others nodded emphatically.

“Just *Ikai* is enough…”

“We couldn’t,” said another of the men.

“You’re not slaves any longer, you’ll never be that again!”

Ilas nodded and they all stood up. Ikai sighed. It would take a long time to wipe a lifetime of servitude from his people’s minds. Probably several generations…

“When do you think it’ll be ready?”

The old carpenter ran his gaze over the jetty and put his hand on his chin thoughtfully.

“I’d say we’ll need two or three more weeks to make it safe enough to withstand the attacks of Mother Sea when she’s in a rage. But it’s hard to tell. This isn’t the great river…”

“You’re doing very well, Ilas. Keep up the good work.”

“You honor us, Hero of the Seno… Ikai…”

Ikai shook his head, smiled at the old craftsman, and went on along the jetty to the first fishing boat to be tied up there.

“Good fishing, Airol?” he asked.

The fisherman and his son Taler were unloading the fruits of their day’s work while his wife Maira, who had come to welcome them, picked up the

worn net to repair later on. Unfortunately they lacked supplies of any kind, and everything had to be made with whatever was at hand nearby. The family of fishermen greeted Ikai in the same ceremonious manner as the builders.

“There’s no need…” he started to protest, but he knew it was useless.

“Our dear Mother Oxatsi has blessed us with an excellent catch today,” Airol told him, and showed him a huge basket filled with different kinds of fish.

Ikai did not know enough to recognize them… “Wonderful, are they all edible?” he asked Maira.

“The biggest and ugliest, yes. And the ones Taler’s already unloaded. These ones here: we don’t know whether they are or not.” She indicated a smaller basket. “I’ve set them aside just in case. They’re kinds we’ve never seen before… they’re probably edible, but we’d better make sure before someone gets sick or poisoned.”

Ikai looked at the contents of the wicker basket. In fact there was so much they did not know in that new world that often he felt like a small child discovering the wonders of an incredible, unknown universe which he had been denied his whole life.

“You know the Rule: any unknown food we find, whether it’s fish, fruit, fowl or wild berries, must be taken to Idana so that she can study it and establish whether it’s edible or not. She’s the Apothecary, and the only one who has the authority to decide.”

“That’s the Rule, and that’s what will be done,” Maira said whole-heartedly.

“Any news?” Ikai asked Airol.

“We’ve been fishing near the continental coast, to the east. We didn’t go very far. There were plenty of fish and it wasn’t necessary.”

“Did you keep together?”

“Yes, we did, the four boats, as it was decided. No-one strays alone.”

Ikai nodded in agreement. They knew nothing of the perils which might surround them. On the one hand those of the sea and an immense, rugged, unexplored coast, and on the other the danger represented by Hunters and Enforcers of the Gods. They had to be very cautious.

“But I must say I’d love to explore the coast, and my son’s eager to go further out into Mother Sea. Isn’t that so, Taler?”

The thin young man nodded energetically and smiled broadly.

“I can understand that, but what you want is dangerous, and you know it. These boats are small and fragile, and the coast is treacherous…”

“Mark his words, you blockheads,” said Maira. She was shaking her head and looking disapprovingly at her son.

“But a Senoca must dream of going out into Mother Sea… sail her immensity, explore the horizon…” Airol replied. There was a dreamy look on his face.

“Of course,” Ikai said, “but for the moment we’d better be extra cautious and keep on dreaming. One day, not too far in the future, when we have a better understanding of our environment, of the sea which bathes this coast, the climate and its cycles, your dream will come true.”

“I’ll be waiting for that day.”

“Just as I’ve been waiting a whole lifetime for some common sense to make its way into that thick head of yours,” Maira scolded, with her hands on her hips.

The good humor infected Ikai, who smiled cheerfully. He gazed along the coastline as far as his eye could see.

“Any sign of danger? Enforcers?”

“No, we didn’t see a soul. The whole eastern coast seems uninhabited. White sand beaches, rough cliffs, a small bay and forests: that’s all we’ve seen.”

“Very well. Always be on the alert. If you come across any kind of danger, avoid it and give the alarm promptly.”

“So we will.”

Ikai took his leave of the family, who went back to their tasks again, and visited the other three fishing boats which were also unloading the fruits of the day’s work. He exchanged greetings and friendly words with the fishermen and listened to what they had to tell. Fishing had quickly become the community’s main means of support, and he paid close attention to any comments the fishermen had to make. He was also worried that one of the ships of the Gods or their Enforcers might discover them. It was something

that made him restless, a fear which haunted him like an ominous shadow and robbed him of sleep at night. The fishermen told him a storm was brewing, but they were not sure whether it would reach the island.

When he had finished his visit he turned toward the village. His mother was expecting him for the night council, and he did not want to make her wait. Solma was always very uneasy if he or Kyra did not return when they were supposed to. She had not yet come to terms with all that had happened; probably she never would.

None of us have. We've barely spoken about it. Nobody wants to mention it, as if it might bring bad luck, as if the Gods might hear us if we did, and find us. A stupid superstition, but none of them, Kyra, Idana, Urda or Albana, have put it to the test.

He took off his shoes and made his way across the beach, letting his feet sink into that soft white sand which charmed his senses. Walking through that paradise, with the now indigo sea, the golden sand under his feet and the green forest before his eyes, was a dream come true. Like a child he enjoyed every moment in that paradise, enjoyed what he had always longed for. He looked around, stretched out his arms and spun in a circle, letting the sea breeze caress him with its moist hands. He could not have been happier.

I can't believe we're here, in this wonderful place… and free!

He smiled at the sky. For the first time he realized his soul was joyful: more than that, he was happy… That was something he had not been for an eternity, ever since they had put the Ring on him as a child.

I have everything I've ever wished for: my family, a home in a wonderful place and freedom. I don't want anything else.

For a moment, in the middle of the bay, listening to the song of exotic birds, the rustle of the breeze and the murmur of the waves breaking on the beach under a sky of pink and orange silk, he felt he was in a dream he had no desire ever to wake up from.

"Enjoying the touch of the sea breeze, Hero of the Senoca?"

Ikai turned to the voice and saw Isaz waving at him from under the trees on the edge of the forest. He returned the wave and went over to the trapper, leaving the beach behind.

"Where have you come from, Isaz? I haven't seen you for several days."

“From the continent, to the west, from the great forests. Hunting is great there.”

“That’s true. You asked for permission to leave the island and explore them last week.”

“Too many things in a leader’s head, you can’t remember everything,” Isaz said with a friendly laugh.

Ikai liked the experienced hunter. He was direct and always said clearly what he thought. And he was almost always right, which Ikai was deeply grateful for. He was nearly fifty springs old and came from the Fourth County, where he had been a trapper. His skin was weathered, his muscles sinewy and his eye experienced, and he was one of the few who felt truly at ease in this wild environment.

“Yes, too many. At this rate I’ll end up completely out of it, or else in total despair. Or both.”

“Hah! Leading a colony of refugees like ours is exhausting. Everything to be built, still needing to be done. We’re starting from scratch. It’s the beginning, and all beginnings are hard. And this one is going to be even harder.”

“Well, yes, it’s proving difficult…”

“That’s natural. Most of the refugees are farmers, and they’re completely at a loss in this distant place that’s so different from what they’re used to. It’ll take time, but in the end they’ll make it their home. I’m sure of it. Now they need direction and leadership, with someone telling them what to do and how.”

“I wouldn’t mind letting you have the privilege for a few weeks. I know perfectly well you’re very capable…”

“Oh, no! Not for all the Regent’s wine! I’m a trapper, and this is my contribution to the community.” He showed Ikai a dozen hares he was carrying, hanging from his belt.

“We can go without your hunting,” Ikai said, waving his hand towards the fishing boats in the distance.

“Ha, ha! Fish? Who wants fish when they can have meat?” He turned to open a huge leather satchel. In it were pieces of meat wrapped in leaves to keep them fresh.

“What’s this delicacy you’ve caught?”

“A pretty big deer,” he replied, and smiled proudly.

“I have to say you’re right…”

“And what’s more, fish don’t provide pelts for the winter,” he added with a wink.

Ikai laughed cheerfully. “Come on, let’s go back, they’re waiting for me…”

“Are you sure you want to go back to that torture?”

“I can assure you there’s nothing I want less. If at least they’d let me join in the building work…”

“You? Work building houses? That’s not worthy of a leader, and even less worthy of a Hero of the Senoca,” Isaz said with a roguish grin.

“Let’s go, before I name you my counselor and you have to be tortured alongside me.”

Isaz laughed. “No, please, no! Have mercy!” They went into the thick vegetation, away from the beach, towards the hidden village.

Ikai took advantage of the walk to have a good chat with the trapper. This was one of the men he thought might be most useful in the small community, and it was a chance to get to know him a little better. The path led them to a dense area of forest with lush vegetation. They went into it, admiring their surroundings. Birds and flowering plants which left Ikai speechless now surrounded them on all sides. They went further into the forest towards the north, using as their point of reference a solitary bald peak which rose in the distance.

“Everything in order, out west?” Ikai asked as he parted the vegetation.

“I didn’t find any trace of Enforcers or Hunters, or any other men.”

“That’s good news.”

“But I did find the footprints of an enormous cat.”

Ikai glanced at him and saw worry on Isaz’s face.

“Prints that were too big… of a huge cat… not natural… I couldn’t see it, but judging by the size of the prints and their depth in the mud, it had to be hellish big.”

“I see. I’ll give warning.”

“You’d better, or we might have a disaster.”

They went on, until suddenly the forest disappeared, to be replaced by an immense open area of tall grass.

Ikai’s spirits rose. “Here we are,” he said.

Isaz smiled. “You go away for a few days and you miss this place,” he said.

The area of grassland was completely surrounded by the forest which protected it. It was divided by a river which flowed from north to south towards the sea. The two men stopped to contemplate the place with broad smiles. In the center of the area, a hundred or so houses in different stages of construction formed a rectangular labyrinth of adobe. More than a hundred people were working on the building of the village, like tireless ants raising a new colony to live in. To the east, where the land was richer, fields had been cleared, and several families were tilling the soil.

“There are more of us every day,” Ikai said. He shook his head in disbelief. “And to think there weren’t even a dozen of us when we came…”

“How many are there now?”

“With the last group, over five hundred.”

“By Oxatsi! We’ll soon be a real big city!”

“Or we’ll die if we don’t tread much more carefully…” Ikai said. He was watching a group of children running and laughing happily as they played among the vegetable plots south of the river.

“You can’t blame them for being happy, for wishing for a better world, for fighting with all their hearts for a new beginning, in freedom.”

“I know, but I don’t want them to forget what’ll happen to us if we’re found… There should be someone watching here. Where is the Guard?”

“Don’t worry so much, Ikai, I know you do it from your heart, but you must live a little.”

A man emerged suddenly from their left, carrying a thick trunk on his shoulder. “Ikai! Isaz!” he hailed them. He carried a horn tied to his belt. Ikai looked at him in surprise. When he came closer, he saw a second man appear at the other end of the tree trunk.

Ikai pointed to the horn he was carrying. “Martis, shouldn’t you be on watch duty?” he asked sternly.

“Yes, well… I… you see, Danco came and he needed help with the tree and …”

Ikai shook his head.

Isaz came up to the two men. Glaring at Martis, he said: “If you’re on watch duty, you’re on watch duty, you melon-head!”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, I’ll get down to it right away.”

“Get back to your post, this minute. And don’t let this ever happen again!”

The two men walked away so fast the tree nearly ended up in the river.

“Thank you,” Ikai said, and gave Isaz a grateful smile.

“You’re welcome. I enjoyed that, I should do it every day,” Isaz said, and burst out laughing. Ikai joined in the laughter, and the two went towards the village, which the refugees had named The Shelter.

As he walked by, the people dropped what they were doing to call out to him. Smiling, he greeted the builders who were putting up the mill, the group building the bridge which would join both halves of the village, the women working in the vegetable gardens, the children who came to see one of the Heroes, the archers who were practicing their aim and looked for his approval, and whom Isaz stayed with. He greeted them all, and with all he exchanged kind words.

“They love and respect you, my son.” Solma told him. She was waiting at the door of the council house. Beside her was Idana, smiling.

“There’s chicken broth and stew waiting for you,” Solma said with a smile.

“That certainly cheers my soul, Mother. I’m famished,” he said gratefully. Exploring with Albana had given him a healthy appetite.

He ate in the company of the two women, and they chatted easily about village affairs until night fell.

Suddenly there came the sound of a horn. A sustained complaint.

The alarm!

Ikai got to his feet. The horn sounded again. He leapt over the table and hastened into the village square.

Telmas was running toward him. “It’s coming from the south!” he said. He was followed by his brother Volte, and both were carrying their bows.

“It sounds too close, on the border,” Ikai said. He ran in for his bow, hung the quiver on his back and…

“What’s the matter, son?”

“I don’t know, Mother, I’m going to find out. Both of you stay here and don’t come out.”

Idana nodded and took Solma’s arm. Ikai ran away.

“Everybody get into hiding! Get inside your houses and bolt the doors!” he shouted at the top of his voice.

As they ran to the south following the river, he saw the people following his order as fast as they could.

Isaz appeared from one side, running, bow in hand.

“What’s… the matter?” he asked, panting with the exertion.

“I don’t know,” Ikai replied without slowing down. “Alarm call, to the south,”

They ran to Martis’ post and stopped. Martis was not there. His horn was on the ground, but there was no trace of him.

“Get ready,” Ikai whispered to his companions.

They all nocked their bows but the darkness barely allowed them to see anything. Ikai went forward carefully, bow at the ready. He found the trail which showed where a body had been dragged. He pointed it out to the others. Isaz nodded. Moving more stealthily now, Ikai went in among the trees, following the trail. A few steps later the forest swallowed him up and he could see nothing in the dense vegetation. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then turned and met the eyes of Isaz and the Arken brothers. Their presence reassured him, although in that environment and with such darkness danger could materialize and prove lethal before his companions had time to react. He concentrated and used his senses, inhaling deeply, sniffing for any scent which might mean danger. Nothing. He took a couple of steps, deeply alert, and stopped. He strained his hearing in all directions until a sound reached him from the east. He concentrated on trying to establish what it might be.

Something’s crawling, or else dragging Martis’ body.

He turned and gestured towards the east, Isaz nodded, and the Arkens followed them. Ikai found himself liking the situation less and less. He stepped on something dark and wet, and stopped. He touched it with the tip of his fingers, then put them to his mouth to make sure.

Blood, he thought, deeply worried by now.

He went on with greater caution, trying not to make any noise, stepping warily. All of a sudden an opening appeared in the vegetation to his left with a *creak*, close to his face. His heart skipped a beat. He turned his bow towards the sound, ready to defend himself.

Beyond his raised bow, Albana's eyes greeted him with a gleam.

"By all the…" he started to protest in a whisper, but Albana silenced him with a finger to her lips. With a gesture, the brunette beckoned him on.

He pulled himself together and went on slowly. He found more blood, this time a lot of it. The trail veered east behind a tree. He followed it carefully, in front of him the ground fell to a stream-bed. There under the stars, beside the water an enormous jaguar held Martis, dead, between its jaws. The cat, yellow with black spots and yellow-green eyes, was unnaturally large. The lethal bite had crushed the skull. The gigantic predator was dragging Martis' body as if it were that of a rabbit. It took Ikai a moment to react and aim at the beast. Albana moved to stand beside him at once, and Isaz followed. Ikai looked for the Arken brothers and beckoned to them.

Massive and lethally beautiful, the jaguar left the body aside and began to drink at the stream. Ikai knew it would turn round at any moment and see them. He looked at the others and nodded slowly.

Five arrows reached the great jaguar. The beast, caught by surprise, crossed the stream in an astonishing leap. It turned its eyes on the group, who were readying their arrows to shoot again, then with a roar of rage and pain it disappeared into the forest.

Ikai turned to Albana. "Didn't you tell me you'd explored the island? That you hadn't seen anything strange?"

"That's so," she replied with a frown.

"And that beast?"

Albana shrugged. "The fact that I hadn't seen it doesn't mean it doesn't prowl around here. This is a very big island… and you're the tracker, don't

forget, not me.”

“Damn! And what do we do now?”

Albana smiled. “I think we’ll have to organize a search. See what else we find. Tomorrow, when it’s proper light.” With an amused smile, she said goodbye and left.

Ikai sighed. The Shelter was not a completely safe refuge after all. Just thinking about what else they might find made his hair stand on end.

Chapter 3

Adamis strode determinedly into the High Chamber. They would not see him waver. Whatever the final verdict might be, he would obey it, even if he were sentenced to death.

“Who comes before the Five High Kings, Lords of the Elements?” the Alderman asked ceremonially. He wore an austere judge’s robe.

Adamis went to stand in front of him. The Alderman’s golden face was peaceful and his eyes shone with intelligence and knowledge. For over a month, since Lord Asu had recovered from his wounds and formally accused Prince Adamis, he had been conducting the trial on the orders of their Majesties. For over a month Adamis had had to defend himself against the accusations against him arising from the serious incident, accusations punishable by death.

“Adamis, Prince Heir of the House of Eret, of the First Ring, comes before you,” he said. He kept his chin held high and looked straight at the Alderman, for whom he felt no aversion. He was doing his duty, and indeed he did it very well,

“Accuser or accused?

Adamis swallowed, “Accused.”

The Alderman made a sign to one of the three Eyes-of-the-Gods, who made a note of it in his silver book.

“This Alderman recognizes Lord Adamis of the House of Eret. The Prince may take his place.” He indicated to Adamis that he should stand on a black circle to the right, beside an Eye who would take down every word when he gave his testimony.

With solemn steps the Prince went over to the place indicated and stood on the black circle of accusation. He bent on one knee and remained with his head bowed.

Today my fate will be decided.

He glanced furtively at the Five Kings. He froze, such was the power they emanated, the sense of intimidation they provoked, even the one he knew so well: his own father. On a circular golden platform which levitated above the crystal clear floor, their all-powerful Majesties presided from intricate silver thrones. They wore rich yet sober gowns of the finest silks, embroidered in silver, each in accordance with the element which represented their power: the color of their family and realm. On each of their chests was embroidered the emblem of the House they ruled. They also wore jeweled crowns, magnificently crafted with precious stones which marked them as leaders and monarchs among the Golden. On their chests hung the five ancestral pendants which showed they were Masters of the Elements as well as High Kings, the highest expression of Power among their people. Their shriveled golden bodies, sprinkled with copper spots, shone now with a faint sheen of rejuvenation.

Youth robbed from the young girls who were sacrificed to this end, for the greater glory of our civilization. Adamis could not help a grimace of disapproval as he looked away.

There came a shrill vibration announcing the arrival of the accuser, and the doors of the chamber opened. Lord Asu walked into the hall arrogantly, as if wherever he stepped belonged to him. He gave Adamis a glare of pure hatred, a hatred so visceral it seemed it might burst into flames at any moment. But not there, in front of their Majesties; it would be the end of him. He went up to the Alderman and stopped, without taking his furious eyes off Adamis, as he had done all through the trial.

Adamis ignored Asu's glare. *He is no more than a raging bull, and as such is very dangerous. I must be cautious. This situation is very volatile, and I must deal with it delicately. The day will come when he gets his due,* he thought to himself, ignoring the glare.

"Who comes before the Five High Kings and Lords of the Elements?" the Alderman asked once again.

"Lord Asu, Heir Prince of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring."

"Accuser or accused?

"Accuser," Asu barked angrily.

"This Alderman recognizes Lord Asu of the House of Aureb. The Prince may take his place." With a gesture he indicated that he should stand on a

white circle to the left, beside an Eye who would take down his testimony.

Hastily and vigorously, Asu went to his position and sank to one knee before their Majesties.

“Accuser, accused and High Court,” the Alderman said, addressing first Asu and then Adamis, and finally, with an elaborate bow, the Five Kings, “the trial is renewed.”

The Five gave their consent with the trace of a nod. Such was their power that the tiny gesture completely disrupted the atmosphere in the chamber and a wave of energy reached Adamis, as if a great wave of the sea had broken against his body. It was hard to believe that only months ago the Five had been hibernating in their sarcophagi in that same hall. But much had changed since then; the sarcophagi had now been removed, and in their place rose five thrones with their almighty Majesties ruling from them.

A cycle of power ended with the Ceremony of Vivification, and a new one begins. The cycle of lower power has now passed, the cycle in which the High Kings rested to extend their already long existence in a desperate race against death, while we, the Princes and Regents of each House, ruled while we waited for them to wake up. Adamis sighed. Now the cycle of higher power was beginning, in which the Five High Kings woke from their repose to lead their civilization to new glories: a time of advances, conquests and discoveries was beginning under the rule of the powerful Kings. During the lower cycle an intense struggle for power had broken out, both between the Houses and within them, for the leadership vacuum was obvious and there were many who vied for position. It was a time of in-fighting, of petty spats and treason. The rulers devoted little time to the search for grandeur and progress, being much more concerned with more down-to-earth things like survival. Adamis snorted*: I am glad I do not have to rule my House, do not have to look over my shoulder constantly in case a dagger is on its way. But my father’s return worries me. I very much fear it will bring consequences… ones I do not wish for… His vision for our future and the means to achieve it have always been different from mine, and a source of argument. And after all that has happened, all that I have experienced and discovered, it is even more.*

The Alderman cleared his throat. “Lord Adamis, you are accused, in the first place, of treason: of interfering in the sacred ritual of Vivification and helping the Selected to escape after the ritual. Secondly, you are accused of

breaking the Law of Blood: by shedding royal blood, that of Lord Asu of the House of Aureb. And in the third place, you are accused of having provoked a diplomatic incident with the exiled House of Hila on their own island of Hiltok. Each and every one of these crimes carries the death penalty. Do you still maintain your innocence of all these accusations?"

"I do so maintain."

"You do? How dare you?" Asu barked furiously.

A dull, threatening murmur descended from the Five and enveloped Asu. He was quiet at once, and his body began to tremble uncontrollably. There was pain on his face.

"Lord Adamis, you have the right to make a final statement before the High Court," the Alderman said, with a wave in the direction of the Five Kings.

Adamis took a deep breath, quelled any trace of nervousness in his body and drew himself up to his full height. "As I have consistently maintained before this court during the trial against my person, I did not interfere in the ritual of Vivification. The Ceremony was carried out according to tradition and with complete purity. The Five Houses were present and bore witness to that. Furthermore, the Five can attest that the vital essence of the Selected was passed on to their bodies in its entirety."

"In that case, how is it possible that several slaves survived? And what were you doing with them?" Asu's finger jabbed at Adamis. His eyes flashed furiously and his body was hunched and trembling.

Adamis ignored Asu and went on with his statement. "As my Erudite Notaplo has already testified, the slaves do not always die in the process of Vivification; there have been cases in which they survived. This fact is precisely what Notaplo wished to study with this batch of Selected, since like any great scholar he is always in search of knowledge which might lead us to immortality. That was what we were doing there: picking up the corpses and possible survivors for further study. Luckily it turned out that several Selected still had a residue of life in them, and Notaplo revived them."

"You cannot seriously believe we are going to swallow such nonsense!" Asu shouted.

“Whether you believe it or not is not my concern. As to the accusation of shedding royal blood, as I have already stated, I simply defended myself from Lord Asu’s attack. I did not begin the hostilities, and I must remind the court that Lord Asu’s attack on me cost the life of my Champion Rotec. That is why it is he, not I, who must be accused of shedding blood.”

“You denied me my slave. Mine by right!”

“Once selected and sacrificed, a slave does not belong to anybody,” Adamis went on, keeping his voice calm and deliberately ignoring Asu. “And finally, regarding the diplomatic incident, I must point out that I negotiated the rescue of the living slaves with Lord Woz and obtained his approval, so there would have been no incident had Lord Asu not attacked me.”

“Damn you!” Asu yelled, beside himself with rage.

“Keep your composure, Lord Asu, you are in the presence of the Five High Kings,” the Alderman reminded him.

Asu glanced aside at the Kings, then immediately shrugged and lowered his eyes.

Adamis noticed his rival’s fear, and rejoiced in it. He was afraid of the Five, and he was right to be. They were powerful, as well as implacable and ruthless. They would not tolerate the slightest slip, the slightest offense. Not even his own father would allow that of him. To dishonor a House, still more in the presence of the other Royal Houses, was considered the greatest of insults, something unpardonable, even more so in a Prince.

“Does the accuser maintain the charges, then?” the Alderman enquired formally.

“By the fire! Of course I do!”

The Alderman nodded and bowed. “Both parties have made their cases, the facts are known, the accusations and defenses have been made before the Five. As the accusation has not been withdrawn, the accused must be judged by law.” He gave an elaborate bow and remained with his head bent before their Majesties.

The Five exchanged glances. A funereal silence descended upon the chamber, and they began their deliberation.

Adamis tried to listen to what they said, but he found it impossible, as they had closed their thoughts to the others so that the conversation was for

themselves only. While he awaited a verdict which might very well cost him his life, he pondered on the succession of events. He looked at the floor of clear glass and the hall around him, the very one in which the ceremony had taken place. *Everything started here. I do not regret doing what I did. Far from it: I believe I did what I ought. I could not let Kyra be consumed and die…* Notaplo's plan had worked; the developed catalyst he had used had allowed them to keep a trace of life-essence in their organisms. Yet despite that, the subsequent turn of events on the island of the dead had been tragic, something he had not foreseen and would have to live with. *I am sorry, Rotec, deeply sorry. Nobody could have wished for a better friend, a more loyal defender. You gave your life for me, through my own fault, through my own actions. I beg your forgiveness, for your life is irreplaceable. I shall always carry you in my soul as the brother I lost.*

A disturbance in the atmosphere around him made him shiver painfully. He came back to reality. The Five had finished their deliberations and were watching him with deep eyes, lacking any empathy. They sat in the order of their Houses, from left to right.

"Have your Majesties reached a verdict?" the Alderman asked. His head was still bowed.

We have, the five replied in unison. The mental message was so thunderous and powerful that Adamis's mind was on the point of finding itself unable to bear it and collapsing. He closed his eyes and contained that explosion within his head, in agony. Asu too was suffering the same torture.

Kaitze, the High King of the House of Aurez, of the Third Ring, rose and took a step forward. He was dressed in white, his body wasted by the thousand years and more during which he had been the ruler of his House. He moved slowly, but every move revealed the enormous Power stored within him, undeniable and portentous. He passed his hand over his cheek, where the copper spots brought by the passing of time were noticeable on the dark gold of his aged skin. The eyes of the Lord of Air, a bright gray, watched the accused for a moment, studying him carefully. Adamis swallowed and prepared for the worst.

"Concerning the accusation of treason, for having interfered with the ritual of Vivification," came his voice as a distant whisper, "we have not found irrefutable proof that this was so. We therefore decree that it has not

been proven before this court that the law was broken. Prince Adamis's word is accepted."

Asu glared furiously at the King, and opened his mouth to protest, but the King raised his finger in his direction as a warning. He would not tolerate any contempt of court, however slight. Asu was forced to stay silent and accept the verdict.

Adamis exhaled with relief. He had avoided the first lethal arrow.

"I humbly accept the judgment of the High Court," he hastened to say, and lowered his head.

Asu was pressing his jaws so tightly together that they were all but dislocated. It took a moment before he could swallow his anger. Adamis found himself wishing it would poison him. Finally he gave way.

"I humbly accept the judgment of the High Court," he said, staring at the floor. His voice shook with fury.

Kaitze sat down on his throne once again and Lur, of the House of Idnem of the Fourth Ring, rose and stepped forward. His long brown robe looked plain in contrast to the rich crown he wore on his head. His brown eyes stared first at Asu and then at Adamis.

"Regarding the second accusation, that of breaking the law of blood," he said in his rasping voice, "there is no doubt that it was broken. Prince Asu suffered severe injuries, and the Champion Rotec died in combat." Lord Asu's face lit up and his eyes shone exultantly, foreseeing victory. "Nevertheless, it has not been established irrefutably and with absolute clarity which of the two parties was to blame for the event."

This time it was Adamis who glared at the King. Lord Asu had been the guilty one, there could be no doubt about that. He was about to say something when he noticed his father's gesture: seated on the first throne, he shook his head almost imperceptibly. Adamis understood the meaning: do not oppose the verdict. Incipient fury gnawed at his stomach like a rabid animal, but he pushed it down and quieted it. It was neither the place nor the moment for demonstrations of any kind. They would not be tolerated.

"This was an incident between two of the Royal Houses, between their heirs," High King Lur went on, "and that is why it is extremely grave: more so taking into account that it occurred during a low cycle, where the priority of both heirs, as *de facto* regents, was to put the wellbeing of their Houses

before any conflict, still more a personal one. For this reason, after lengthy consideration, and at the request of Laino, King of the First Ring, and of Gar, King of the Second Ring, members of this High Court" (he waved his hand at them, while they saluted deferentially) "the accusation will be ignored, and there will be no further investigation into the matter. The balance between the Houses must endure and be safeguarded for the good of our civilization. A war between Houses over an insignificant matter like this must not be permitted. For this reason, too, the behavior of the two Princes cannot remain unpunished, since they ended up by shedding blood, which might have brought about a war between both Houses which could easily have dragged the others into the conflict. The punishment for this temerity will be imposed by the High King of the First House on his son Adamis, and by the High King of the Second House on his son Asu."

This did not please Adamis at all, not only because justice had not been served, but because he would be punished by his father, and he knew his powerful father would never lose face before the other Kings, which left him in an extremely awkward situation. Nor did the sentence please Asu, who was shaking his head with his face distorted by rage. His eyes seemed about to burst out of his head, but he did not dare say a word.

"I humbly accept the judgment of the High Court," Adamis said, bowing his head.

A few moments later Asu repeated the same words.

Edan, King of the House of Aru, of the Fifth Ring, rose and came forward to face the two Princes while Lur returned to his throne. The High King and Lord of Water wore blue and in his hand, gaunt and full of copper spots, he held the ancestral pendant over his chest. It was so large and beautiful that Adamis could not tear his eyes away from it. These pendants had always fascinated him, but his father would never let him near his own for some reason he never deigned to explain.

"Of the third accusation, that of having caused a diplomatic incident with the House of Hila on their own island of Hiltok," Edan said smoothly, "it is true and proven that such an incident occurred. Despite that, and luckily, the exiled House of Hila has made it known to us that they will not press charges as long as they continue to receive the loads of corpses punctually. Still, as with the previous accusation, both Princes must be reprimanded for their ill-omened act. A war between the Houses would be

devastating, but a war with the House of the Dead would be extremely counter-productive for our interests. Something the High Kings do not wish for, something we have always tried to avoid. Whatever the case, this High Court sentences you both to make a public apology to Lord Woz for what happened, and to guarantee that he will receive the cargo he desires."

"I shall never apol…" Asu began to protest, but a gesture from his father silenced him immediately.

Adamis knew that for a Prince, to apologize was something practically unthinkable. Far more so before an exiled House, those who were not worthy of living in the Eternal City because of their corrupt practices of Power. Asu, like many of their people, hated the House of Hila, and apologizing to them publicly represented an insufferable insult. *Fortunately in my case the insult is not so gross, since apologizing or admitting to an error makes us better. That is what Notaplo has taught me with his example, and that is what I believe. I do not like the House of Hila, nor their dark beliefs and the ill-omened powers they make use of, but we caused an incident on their island, and for that I shall apologize.*

"I accept the sentence," he said, bowing his head in respect.

Asu breathed in sharply, and after a snort of disgust he too accepted the sentence.

"The High Court has passed judgment," the Alderman said. "The trial is over. Accuser and Accused, you may leave. Everything has been duly noted and registered." He indicated the Eyes-of-the-Gods.

Adamis breathed out. He was coming out of the High Court alive, something which only hours before had seemed highly unlikely to him. His father had exerted a lot of influence and pressure, as well as using his alliances; no doubt of that. Now would come the punishment and his father's disapproval and reproach. For a moment he wished he had been found guilty.

The Alderman left the room, and with him the three Eyes. Adamis was about to leave too when Kaitze, Lord of Air, spoke to him again.

"Adamis, stay. There is something we wish to discuss with you."

The prince stopped and turned to the Five. Asu left the hall with a suspicious glare.

“I am at the service of the High kings,” Adamis said with a deep bow. *Something is not right. Why do they want to talk to me?* He looked at his father, but the silver-gray eyes showed only harshness.

“From what transpired during the trial and the subsequent investigation,” Kaitze began amiably, something which worried Adamis even more, “the slaves, several of them, managed to escape…”

“That is so.” Adamis was beginning to see where this interrogation was heading, and he did not like it at all.

“That is really unfortunate,” said Lur, Lord of Earth.

“More than unfortunate, it is intolerable”, Gar, Lord of Fire, burst out. “Slaves escaping our city, our domain: it is unacceptable!” His rage became a contained burst of power which spread throughout the chamber at great speed. Adamis felt himself pierced by a scorching heat, and for a moment the temperature in the room increased until it was almost unbearable. He strained his neck, trying to breathe, but he was burning. He thought he was going to faint. At that moment Gar touched his pendant and a red flash issued from it. The temperature in the hall became breathable once more. Adamis bent over, coughing, trying to recover.

“Indeed, Gar, it is disquieting and unacceptable, you are right. It is something we cannot tolerate,” said Edan, Lord of Water.

“If you will allow me…” Kaitze went on, and the High Kings nodded as they sat back on their thrones. “You see, Adamis, no slave has ever returned alive from the Eternal City, as they call it, and this is for a simple reason: the less the slaves know about their Gods, the more fear they will feel in their hearts. For over a thousand years it has been so, and it has served our purposes extremely well. As far as the slaves are concerned we are almost unreal: nightmare entities they cannot even put a face or form to. They fear us, and a large part of that irrational fear arises from the fact that they know nothing more about us than the fact that we make decisions about their miserable existences. Particularly where and when those existences come to an end. And this creates puzzlement and fear, even terror, in their souls, and as long as it remains so, our civilization will continue to flourish at their expense. Therefore you will understand that the fact that several slaves have escaped is somewhat worrying. Certainly unfavorable.”

“I understand…” Adamis murmured. He was even more worried now.

“During the trial you testified that the four slaves who fled from the Island of Hiltok did so through the portal, and that you do not know how they managed to manipulate it… Considering that three other slaves fled using a portal here in the city itself, it is possible that someone knew how to manipulate them?”

“That is impossible,” roared Gar. “They are nothing more than dirty slaves! How could they possibly manipulate a portal?”

“We must not underestimate the slaves. They could not cross the Boundary either, and now we now that some of them can.”

The look Gar gave Laino, Adamis’ father, was heavy with suspicion. “So the rumor has reached your ears as well…”

“It has indeed, and it is no rumor but a fact,” said Laino. “This means that not only have the slaves managed to escape from our City, they are also capable of evading the Boundary and either using or altering our own artifacts. They are achieving unthinkable things. That is what should really worry us.” His eyes turned to the other High Kings, one by one.

“We must find these slaves, to prevent them talking about us, about our city, about what they have witnessed,” Gar said, clenching his fist tightly. “We must find them in order to interrogate them and wring what they know from them, everything they know…” He was frowning, his eyes burning.

Lar nodded. “Yes, we must kill them, together with all those they name under interrogation. Things must go back to what they were. We cannot allow them to talk.”

“Things do not often go back to what they were,” Laino said, and Adamis agreed with his father silently.

“If they are torn up by the root, they will,” Gar said with a crooked smile.

“I too believe we must eliminate the problem at once, without leaving any trace, before it grows,” Kaitze said. “Do you know where the fugitives could be?”

“No, I do not,” Adamis said. Although it was true, he risked his neck if he did not answer truthfully. *I am getting into a very boggy stretch here, and if I am not careful the bog might swallow me.*

“What race were they?” Gar asked.

“They were Senoca.”

“Both fugitive groups? They were all Senoca?” Gar asked in puzzlement.

Adamis pretended to think over the question, his right hand on his chin and his gaze distant. “Yes, I believe they were all Senoca.”

“That is a significant piece of information,” Laino pointed out. “Perhaps the problem is only among them, and not more widespread.”

“The Senoca… that is the Fifth County, is it not?” Kaitze asked. The Lord of Air looked pointedly at Edan, the Lord of Water.

“Yes, it is our County,” the latter replied.

“Well there seems to be something very wrong in your County,” Gar said accusingly, with the same fiery stare as his son.

“Until now there has been nothing significant or noteworthy,” Edan said defiantly. “We look after our County as well as you all do yours. Five Houses, Five Counties, each the responsibility of a House: so says our law, and so we observe it.”

Gar grinned crookedly. “That is not what it looks like …”

Edan stood up. “I will not let anyone insult my House, or the management of our County.”

“Sit down, Edan,” Laino said, trying to brush things aside with a wave of his hand. “Nobody is accusing you of anything.”

Edan glanced at Gar, then sat down again.

“So our social and political structures are still working properly?” Lur asked.

“The Enforcers report punctually, and everything is within the established parameters. There are no delays in the shipments, the production is stable, the slaves are multiplying: everything is under control.”

“Under apparent control…” grunted Gar.

“Who is the Regent of that County? Is he able?” Kaitze asked.

“His name is Sesmok; he is an able, heartless rat. He would sell his entire family for three gold coins. He serves us well. He has the slaves

properly terrified and subdued. He delivers everything he is asked for, and has a taste for blood and torture."

"In that case, charge him with finding the seven fugitives," Gar said. "Let him bring them to us, and do it speedily. But make sure he understands that if he fails we will skin him alive, after taking out his eyes."

"Do not worry, Gar, I know how to take care of my domains."

"Are we going to leave this matter in the hands of the Regent and the Enforcers?" Laino asked. "Let me remind you that it is important … it might spread to the other Counties, like a disease. We must act now, with all the strength of our Power: cut off the evil at the root."

Gar made a scornful gesture. "They are no more than a bunch of filthy slaves, such insignificant worms. You do not mean us to dirty our hands with such a triviality, do you? That would be an unforgivable waste of time and energy. Those cockroaches are not worthy of it, and neither my House nor I will squander a shred of Power on them."

Kaitze, the Lord of Air, nodded emphatically. "I feel the same way. They are trivial, a slight nuisance to be eliminated, true, but without our being obliged to intervene directly, much less make use of our Power."

"It is decided then. Sesmok will bring us the seven fugitive slaves, dead or alive. Let our Enforcers on the continent take active part in the search and capture."

"And put pressure on the Regent," Gar said sarcastically. "He must be adequately motivated."

"With the Enforcers and the Regent searching for them," Edan said, "we will soon find them and put an end to this trouble, this stain on my honor."

When he heard these last words a shiver ran down Adamis' spine. *Flee, Kyra, hide! By whatever you love most, hide!*

Chapter 4

Ikai's sword deflected the thrust. The sound of metal against metal rang with its alarming song. With a swift twist of his wrist he deflected the sword searching for his stomach.

"I got you!" cried Kyra.

The comment was followed by a powerful cut towards his left thigh. But the movement had been clumsy, he saw it coming and moved his leg away slightly. The sword found only air and his opponent lost her balance, leaving herself completely exposed.

"Damn!" she cried in frustration.

Ikai seized his chance to launch a kick at his sister's unprotected side, and brought her down.

She gave him an angry look. "You enjoyed that blow, didn't you, brother?" she accused him from the floor,

Ikai shrugged, but kept his face expressionless. "You're the one who insists that I teach you how to fight. I just do it as best I can," he said. But even he realized the answer had not sounded very convincing.

"Yeah… sure…" Kyra got to her feet and looked around. "If anyone laughs I'll give him a black eye," she said to the thirty-odd young people sitting on the floor in the first training circle that cool morning. And to make it crystal clear, she clenched her fist and showed it to them. Silence fell on the training arena, south of the village. Those poor refugee peasants would never dare say anything to one of the Seven Heroes; more than that, they lowered their heads and looked away when their paths crossed, very much as they would before an Enforcer. And still less would they dare make any comment to Kyra, whose temper was something everybody in the Shelter was already familiar with.

"Stop scaring them. It's their turn next, and they have a lot to learn."

“If you teach them like that, they’re not going to learn very much,” Kyra protested.

In fact they were willing, even though they were terrified of wielding a weapon. For a slave it was something unthinkable, still more so to confront one of the Heroes whom they venerated. Ikai watched them surreptitiously out of the corner of his eye. He had asked for volunteers in order to train defenders and watchmen to protect the Shelter, and these were the ones who had come forward. They were almost all young and strong. They would do. Now he just had to train their bodies, and above all to break their slave mentality and turn them into fighters. It was not going to be easy.

He faced his sister and half-closed his eyes. “You’d better apply yourself, little sis,” he said, stressing the last words. “You fight with all the skill of a sick duck.”

Kyra’s eyes opened wide, and a curse stuck in her throat.

“You…you…You’ll see!” She lunged at him with a wild, downward-arching thrust, but once again the blow was totally predictable and horrendously executed. He moved sideways and turned half-round. Kyra passed in front of him, completely off- balance. Holding back his glee at what he was about to do, he spanked his sister with the flat of his sword.

There was a murmur of stupefaction among the apprentices. Some covered their mouths with their hands, others watched in open disbelief.

Kyra’s face reddened like a ripe tomato. She turned to Ikai with her eyes spitting fire, her face sullen and frowning and her jaw clenched.

“Now you’ve done it!”

Oh oh, he muttered to himself. He knew what tended to happen when he aroused his sister’s temper.

Kyra went for her brother, thrusting to left and right, carried away by her anger. He had to work hard to avoid those uncontrolled attacks. She struck with such force that anyone less skilled and trained would have probably ended up with his head cracked open. The swords were for training, blunt-edged, but they were made of steel and quite heavy, they could cause plenty of damage if wielded furiously. Budin the smith had made them especially to train the future warriors. Ikai gave thanks to Girlai, Father Moon, for sending him that good man, who had become indispensable in the small community as the only one with any knowledge

of the forging of metals, which was something essential in the creation of a village.

He concentrated on dancing around Kyra for a while, dodging and moving aside nimbly to avoid her thrusts, until finally she stopped, panting with exhaustion.

“I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, but you haven’t touched me once, and you can’t hold your sword any longer. Not much of an example to be setting…”

She was trying to recover her breath. “Will you… please… tell me why you’re so angry at me?” she asked.

“Who says I’m angry at you?”

“It’s because of that last rescue, isn’t it?”

“Don’t call them rescues. They’re not rescues at all. We agreed to help a few of our people to escape and find shelter when they needed it. Or at least that was the initial plan. Lately it’s got out of hand.”

“For me it’s a rescue. We rescue them from slavery, from death at the hands of the Regent or the Enforcers.”

“Every one of your *rescues* puts them all in danger,” Ikai said, indicating the circle of apprentices with his sword. He pointed at the houses to the east and the main square to the north. “If we go on bringing people we’ll end up being discovered; this whole place will go up in flames, we’ll all die.”

Kyra looked resentful. “Shall we go on practicing?” she said, raising her sword and deliberately ignoring her brother’s comments.

Ikai threw his head back and looked up at the sky. Summoning all his calm, he tried to relax. *As stubborn as ever, but I must make her see the danger involved in bringing more people. And I have to do it before something bad happens and there’s no way back. I know she does it out of the goodness of her heart, but she must understand the danger involved for all those people.*

His sister launched a sudden stroke at his chest, which he deflected with a sideways block.

“If you’d just listen and pay a little attention to me, just a little, things would go much smoother,” he said, as he counterattacked.

“You see? I knew something was eating you,” Kyra said. She stepped back. “And you can’t pretend, your brow wrinkles. I can see it a mile off.”

“Didn’t I ask you to take the greatest care? I told you we were making too many trips and it was dangerous.”

“Well, I did.”

“You did? You were discovered, and you almost didn’t live to tell the tale!” he replied, with a thrust.

Kyra parried it as best she could and retreated two steps. She looked grimly round the group. “Who told you?” she asked.

Nobody said a word, or even dared to look at her.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t hear that you fought a group of Hunters? A Master Hunter, no less?”

“I bet it was Romen. The others wouldn’t dare. I told them not to say a word to anybody, and I’m positive it wasn’t Urda.”

“Have you lost your mind? How did you even dare? You should never…”

“I had no choice, they were going to be captured. I had to act, it was all up for them!”

“You confronted a Master Hunter! You’re alive by the grace of Oxatsi!”

“Are we going to fight, or are you going to go on lecturing me?”

Ikai shook his head. “You’re impossible!”

“I know,” she said with a roguish smile, and returned to the attack.

He parried her thrusts, then with a quick step forward hit his sister in the chest with his sword. “There’s always a choice, it’s just a question of stopping to think,” he said as she retreated with a grimace of pain from the blow. “And never let yourself be driven by hot blood. In life, just like in combat, the one who keeps his calm and control, the one who uses his head, has the advantage and usually wins.”

“I’m not like you, I can’t stop to think and decide what’s the best choice for every occasion. I’m more for doing something, following my hunches.”

“Well, you’d better learn, or else you’ll never master swordsmanship, or fighting, and what’s worse, I’ll have to bury you.”

“We’ll see,” she said, and launched into the attack. “Besides, if I hadn’t intervened, Liriana would be dead now.”

When he heard that, Ikai’s stomach turned. He thought about the Captain’s turquoise eyes, her face, her courage, and a range of tormenting feelings assailed him. For a single instant he forgot what he was doing, his mind taken up with Liriana’s image. Kyra’s sword took him in the shoulder.

“Yay!” she cried. “Got you!” She raised her arms to the sky in triumph. The apprentices applauded, although one voice called out:

“That wasn’t fair play…”

“Maybe, but I got what I wanted.”

Ikai felt rage. This had rarely happened to him, but the pressure of the situation, the weight of responsibility for Kyra’s wellbeing, for his mother’s, for that of all those people: these things were affecting him. *I guess I’m not so pragmatic, after all.…* He was striving to do the right thing, but he realized that even so he was encountering difficulties; his sister, good-hearted but untamable, was the first of them. He could not let that happen, he could not let her do whatever she wanted, no matter how much he loved her. No matter how much he wanted to be on good terms with her. He was not prepared to lose her. And if he had to get angry with her, then he would. He took a deep breath and calmed down. It was time to impose order.

He jabbed a finger at his sister. “No more rescues until I say so. We aren’t going to take any more risks. You’re not going to gamble with your life any more. And you’re not to leave the Shelter without my permission. Is that clear?”

Kyra wrinkled her nose, frowned and stood with hands on her hips. “In your dreams!”

“I won’t have your death on my conscience. As long as I’m the leader of this community everyone will do as I say, and that includes you. Particularly you,” he added emphatically.

Kyra was about to protest, but at that moment her mother’s voice reached her. “You’ll do what your brother says.”

She turned round and saw Solma arriving, together with Idana and Urda.

“Why, Mother?” she asked, trying to remain firm.

Solma took her to one side and spoke to her softly. “Because he’s right, and you know it. But above all, because he’s our leader, and his authority can’t be challenged, still less by his sister” – she nodded her head toward them – “in front of all these young warriors.”

Kyra gazed at her mother for a moment, taking in her words and their implications. Then she looked at the apprentices, who were watching her as if she were the incarnation of Mother Oxatsi herself. Idana was making gestures at her to comply, her face a single whole-hearted plea. Urda had her hands behind her back, which was her way of showing agreement. Kyra breathed deeply several times, as she always did when she was trying to calm her inner fire and listen to reason. She let her shoulders sag and turned to the group.

“All right, you’re the leader. You command and I obey.”

Ikai let out his breath and nodded. That was enough. *Thank you, Goddess Oxatsi, for making her see reason.*

“And now, if you’ll excuse me, brother, I’ll go along with Urda, to practice throwing the knife. I’m a thousand times better with it than with this wretched sword of yours.”

The two friends went towards the third training circle, where several scarecrows in the form of human beings had been set up at different distances for knife-throwing practice.

Ikai looked for Isaz. The experienced hunter was in the second training circle beside the trees, teaching a dozen middle-aged men how to use a bow.

“Isaz!” he called.

The trapper heard him and turned. Craning his neck, he saw Ikai.

“Send them to run a few laps around the fields till noon.”

“No problem, I’ll see that they do. I’ll make them sweat for a while!” he replied with a wink and a smile.

Ikai turned to the apprentices. “Stand up,” he said, and they did so as one. “The body must be prepared for the fight. You must strengthen it, toughen it. Go with Isaz and follow his instructions without complaint. Learn from his teachings.”

They left immediately at a run.

“I’d love to go with them,” Ikai said as he watched them go.

“I know, my son, but your duties await you.”

“Duties…” he sighed.

“It’s the price we have to pay for this freedom, for this wonderful refuge we’re in, my son.”

Ikai looked around. He gazed at the tilled fields which stretched to the south and the east down to the bordering woods, the many half-built homes, the men and women working tirelessly to turn the village of adobe, forest leaves and reeds into a small town. Slaves who had borne innumerable hardships were now filled with hope as they tasted the sweet nectar of freedom for the first time. *We have to do it, they deserve the opportunity to be happy,* he thought, to cheer himself up. They would manage to create a colony of refugees, to grow and prosper, as long as they kept order and were careful, very careful. He knew he had to take charge of those priorities. Order and wariness, or else they would die in the attempt and it would have all been for nothing.

“We must make it last, Mother.”

“We will, I’m sure of that.”

“Thank you… Mother… for your help with Kyra.”

“No need to thank me. It was the right thing to do. You know what your sister’s like sometimes. She loses her temper, particularly with us, her family, but her heart is pure and true, always remember that.”

“I know, Mother. I know very well, it’s just that sometimes…”

“You mustn’t argue with her in public. Now you’re not just two siblings who love each other and argue as you’ve always done. In the eyes of this community you’re much more, you’re the Heroes of the Senoca, the bearers of hope, the great warriors who are capable of confronting the Enforcers and the Hunters. And especially you, Ikai, you’re the leader of this colony. You must always bear that in mind. Your decisions, your actions must always bear that in mind.”

“I will, and thank you for all your good advice.”

“The council awaits you now, my son. Have a wash and something to eat. It’s time to be in command of this place.”

Ikai nodded resignedly. There was nothing that appealed to him less, but he knew he had no choice.

“How many?”

Idana rolled her eyes. “This week we only have twenty requests for an audience,” she said.

Ikai grinned. “Only twenty… I’m sure you could manage yourselves.”

“Yes, but it’s you they want to see,” Solma said. “The Hero. They’ve chosen you as their leader.”

He indicated Idana. “She’s a Hero too, she can manage just as well.”

“Yes, but I’m the apothecary, I’m here to help, not to lead… besides, I’d be terrible, you know me. I wouldn’t know how to make the difficult decisions; my heart would take over… I don’t have a firm hand…” she admitted with a shrug.

Ikai shook his head and smiled. “You’re a blessing for us all, firm hand or not.”

Idana spread her hands. “I’d really like to help you, but there are certain decisions it takes character and an iron will to make. Those qualities aren’t my strong point, and you know it. What’ll happen the day we have to punish someone, even execute them? I wouldn’t be able to do it, it has to be you, Ikai. I’ll be by your side, and I’ll give you the best advice I can, but it has to be you.”

“Idana’s right,” Solma agreed. “Besides, Kyra and Albana don’t even want to hear about it. Your sister’s put off by the council, and Albana wants to stay on the side. Urda has offered herself as a pair of hands, but not as a leader, since she doesn’t want to be one either. There’s only you left, my son.”

“But I don’t want that responsibility either, Mother. All I want is to live in peace, for all of us to live in peace…”

“But for us all to be able to live in peace someone has to lead us, and to do it well. And right now, that *someone* is you. Accept it, my son, for the good of everyone. Listen to your old mother and heed my words.”

“All right, Mother,” he said reluctantly. “I do it for you, I want you to know that, because of my love for you. I wouldn’t do it for anybody else.” He knew he would lose the argument, just as he had before. “It’s no easy task for me…”

“But you have us,” Idana offered willingly, with her soothing smile. “We’ll help you bear the burden. We’ll be by your side, supporting you. We know it’s a heavy burden, full of responsibility, but we’ll help you to lighten it.”

“Thank you, Idana, I really appreciate that.”

“It’s the least I can do. We’d never have escaped from the Eternal City if it hadn’t been for you. We owe you so much, we owe you our lives.”

“You’d have managed without me, I’m quite sure.”

“I don’t really think so,” Idana said with a heartfelt smile.

“The important thing is that you managed to come back, thanks be to Oxatsi.” Solma said.

“Let’s go to the great hall and make a start, or else it’ll be midnight by the time we finish. Besides, I’m hungry. But if anybody asks me to get some salt, I’ll kick him all the way to the mines of the Third County.”

They went into the building and found it packed. There was no room left for a single person more. On an elevated dais a long table and three roughly-made chairs had been placed. The one in the middle had a higher back, trying to imitate a throne, and Ikai sat in it with Solma and Idana, as his counselors, in the other two. He listened to the first refugee make his request for land for planting wheat in a free area to the west which had still not been subdivided, thinking it was not such a terrible thing after all to spend a few days like this…Much better, at any rate, than being a despicable Hunter, or confronting the Enforcers of the Golden Gods.

The council lasted well into the night. Apart from the requests which had accumulated, they had to talk about the needs of the new group of refugees Kyra had brought. There were many of them. They needed medical attention, clothes and blankets, food and water and a roof to shelter under, apart from other basic needs like hygiene. Organizing it all had taken time and the collaboration of a great many of the residents, but they had finally done it, to a large extent thanks to his two wonderful counselors. Ikai gazed at them and thanked Oxatsi, Mother Sea, and Girlai, Father Moon, for them. Idana smiled; her kind face reflected the joy she felt at being able to help all those poor devils who came fleeing from slavery, hunger, penury and even death itself. His mother too was smiling, pleased, but there was something slightly edgy about her smile, an odd grimace. It worried him.

At last the final audience arrived. It was Romen, the young rebel, Liriana's companion. He had only been able to exchange a few words with him when he arrived. He seemed frank; he had not hidden what had happened, but had explained everything fully. That honesty had opened the door to Ikai's trust, as he knew Kyra had told him not to say a word.

"Welcome, Romen. What can I do for you?"

The young man walked over to the table and bowed his head in a respectful salute.

"There are two things I wish to bring before the leader of the Shelter and his Council."

Ikai waved his hand. "Go ahead, we're listening."

"First, I wish to thank you for your help and kindness. Master Gedrel wishes to convey to you his friendship and good wishes and to thank you for sheltering the refugees he has sent."

"Gedrel can count on my friendship. I don't forget those who've helped me. Although the fact is that we made a deal and we both delivered, so we're even. What's the old fox up to? He wouldn't have sent you here just to thank me for our help."

"The Master sends me to make an additional request which he wishes me to pass on to you in person. There are some people, crucial for the cause…"

Ikai raised his hand and Romen stopped.

"Another group?"

"An important one."

Ikai thought about this carefully. "I'm sorry, but we can't risk another group, not for a while."

"It's a matter of life and death…"

"Lately everything has been that, but the priorities here are very different. There's still so much to do: we have to finish the watermill, raise the palisade against wild beasts, secure the river-level before winter comes so it doesn't flood. Houses and barns have to be built, fields tilled, the island explored, the surroundings secured, and a myriad more things that come higher up the list than Gedrel's wishes."

"But the Master…"

“Wasn’t it you who told me how you almost all perished at the hands of the Hunters during the last transfer?”

“Yes… I don’t understand how they found us. The route was safe…”

“There won’t be any more transports for a while. I won’t risk my people in this, I won’t endanger this Shelter and all the people here. I’m very sorry, but that’s the most logical decision given the situation we’re in. The second question?”

“The second,” Romen began, sounding resigned, “is a warning. Gedrel sends me with some information: Regent Sesmok is looking for you. He’s trying to find you, and showing an uncommon interest.”

“Looking for us?”

“He’s looking for the Heroes. That much we know. He’s sent his Guard and the Hunters after your trail. But he’s not doing it openly, he’s hiding it from the people. Master Gedrel says it’s because he doesn’t want to lend credibility to the rumors that are spreading across all the villages and towns of the Six Counties. The rumors about the Heroes, about your feats…”

“Feats?” Idana asked. “They were no feats. We simply fought for survival with nails and teeth.”

Romen bent his head. “For the slave people that’s what they are. You confronted the Enforcers, the Gods themselves, you’ve crossed the Boundary, created this shelter where men are free… Those are unimaginable feats inside the Boundary.”

Idana nodded. “If you put it like that, it might seem like an achievement… I’m not saying it’s not, but if you’d lived through it I can assure you you’d feel very different.”

“This is a great first step for our people, you’re Heroes in your own right,” Romen said with feeling. He bowed to Ikai and Idana.

“I don’t understand it, why is the Regent looking for us?” Ikai said. The bad news worried him. He hoped the swine would know nothing of what had happened, or that if he did know, he assumed they were dead. “We’re outside the Boundary,” he said. “Won’t he be looking for the other Heroes?” He was careful to avoid saying the names of the ones who were still inside the Boundary: Liriana and Maruk.

“Gedrel believes the Regent is under orders to capture all of you. All seven.”

“Orders from whom?

“A direct order… from the Gods themselves…”

A murmur of shock and fear arose, filling the nave of the building. They were all afraid. Ikai knew they were right to be.

“How did he reach that conclusion? Or does the old philosopher have spies among the Gods? Although now I come to think of it, that wouldn’t surprise me.”

“The Eyes-of-the-Gods are leaning on Sesmok. Our spies inside the palace have told us about it. They’re putting a lot of pressure on him.”

This news upset Ikai. He rose and addressed the hall. “It’s time you went back to your homes to rest. Don’t worry about what you’ve heard here tonight. We’re safe here, far from the Regent. Rest and relax.”

Amid whispers of fear and worry, the refugees left the council. When the last one had gone out, Ikai turned to Romen.

“Not you, Romen. Stay for a moment, please.”

The young rebel nodded, put his hands behind his back and stood in a waiting stance. Ikai guessed he had had military training, had possibly been a member of the Guard, like Liriana.

“Guard!” he called. A young man standing by the door with a spear and wooden shield came in with a frightened look.

“Go find Isaz, tell him to bring me the Heroes. I need to talk to them.”

The man left immediately. Ikai looked at his mother, who nodded. Idana was watching Romen, who waited in silence.

It was not long before Isaz came back with Kyra and Urda, who walked into the building looking both surprised and puzzled.

“Where’s Albana?”

Isaz shrugged. “No trace of her. You know her: if she doesn’t want to be found…”

“I know, I know. For once it would be nice if you could all come when I need you.”

There was a creak in the roof, and a dark figure came in through the skylight at the front of the hall. She let herself down like a spider until she stood before Ikai. Taken by surprise, he put his hand to his sword.

“I’ve been here all the time. An interesting meeting, for a change,” Albana said with a roguish smile.

He grunted with relief, and Kyra and Urda smiled at the mysterious brunette as they too let go of their weapons.

“Can’t you come in through the door and attend the meetings inside the building, like everybody else?” Ikai complained.

She shook her long hair loose. “And what would be the fun in that? Hi there, girls!”

“You’ve got to teach me how to do that,” Kyra said to Albana. Her eyes were sparkling.

She winked back. “Whenever you want,” she said.

Ikai shook his head.

Solma had noticed her son’s frustration. “You’d better listen to Ikai, it’s important,” she said.

“Thank you, Mother. Romen, will you repeat what you just told us, please?”

Romen nodded and explained the situation to the newcomers.

“That bastard Sesmok, we should cut his throat!” Kyra exploded.

Urda nodded.

“Kyra…” her mother protested.

“It’s what he deserves, and we all know that,” she said, folding her arms.

“Gently!” said Idana. “He might deserve it, but we need to understand what’s going on and what risks we’re running.”

“The Regent is looking for us,” Albana meditated aloud. “The reason for that would seem to be that the Gods want us dead.”

“The rumors that the rebels are spreading out to the four winds aren’t helping much either,” Ikai said. He looked accusingly at Romen. “Sesmok knows about them. They must have reached him, and soon the Enforcers will know too.”

Urda cleared her throat. “Let me remind you that they’re rumors of rebellion. He won’t stay put before them. He can’t allow himself to, not only for what they signify but to save his own face before the Eyes. He’ll take reprisals. He’s sure to make use of the Guard and the Hunters.”

“The message is the right one,” Kyra said. “The people must listen, they must have hope, they must rise and confront this snake. It’s the only way to find freedom.”

“This is very bad news” Ikai said, sounding worried. “I was hoping everybody would forget about us after what happened, but it’s obvious they haven’t. Far from it.”

“If the Gods want us dead, we’re in serious trouble,” Albana said.

“That bastard Asu,” Kyra said. “I bet he has something to do with this.”

“Very probably, “Albana agreed. “He’ll never forget the insult we caused. No, Asu won’t forget. He’ll want retribution.”

“Will he use the Regent and the Enforcers?” Ikai asked her.

She nodded. “Without a doubt. He wouldn’t dirty his own hands by coming to the mainland. We’re too insignificant to make him stoop to that. His minions will deal with us.”

“Girlai be thanked!” Idana said, looking up at the ceiling.

“We must be as careful as we can,” Ikai said. His eyes held those of his sister. “Nobody must find this place. If Sesmok or the Enforcers find us, that’ll be the end of us, and of all the refugees. I won’t let that happen. No more transports and expeditions. We’ll keep hidden, until this is over.”

“We should fight, confront Sesmok and the Enforcers,” Kyra said.

Urda shook her head. “We don’t have an army, and they do.”

“We’ll, let’s get hold of one!”

“I like your spirit, Kyra,” said Albana, “but Urda’s right, they’d crush us. How many Guards and Hunters can you defeat? Not many, I’d say.”

Idana shivered. “And let’s not forget the Executors and Oppressors.”

“We wouldn’t have a chance,” Ikai said. “Let’s save this place, these people. That’s what we have to do. If Gedrel wants to start a revolution I wish him the best of luck, but they’re searching for us and I’m not going to make it easy for them to find us. No, we’ll stay here together, safe, hidden, just as we decided. Are you with me?”

Idana nodded, then Albana. Urda looked at Kyra, who was biting her lip, and after a moment she too nodded. All eyes went to Kyra, who seemed to be going through a fierce internal struggle. Finally she said: “I’m with the rebels, but I’ll keep my part of the deal with you here. When the Shelter

and its people no longer need me, when this place is able to survive on its own, I'll be on my way."

"Right, so that's decided," Ikai said.

"And if they find us?" Solma asked. There was worry in her voice.

"Let's hope that day never comes," her son replied.

Chapter 5

As she passed by the first training circle, Kyra raised her hand to greet Urda, who was in the center with Isaz.

“Don’t break any bones!” she shouted. She watched the apprentices and saw fear in their eyes. *Poor wretches*, she said to herself with a smile.

Her friend frowned. “Don’t worry,” Urda replied in her usual gruff voice, “it’s too early. I need to warm up my muscles first.”

Isaz had to hide his merriment. The youngsters were terrified. They were about to fight against one of the Heroes, but not just against any of them, against Urda. She was a head taller and double their girth. Even Isaz with his sinewy arms and strong torso appeared puny beside her. Urda’s mahogany eyes swept over them, and they all bent their heads. Nor did it help that her blonde hair was closely cropped, so that she looked more like a man than a woman. What they could not guess was that Urda could be as kind as she was rough, something Kyra had come to value a lot, and all the more so after all they had been through together. Not that the giant girl was soft inside: far from it, inside she was as tough as she was outside, but she made exceptions with some people. Very few of them. Luckily Kyra was one of those. She found this touching, and they had become close friends. Even so, Kyra was careful not to cross her.

“Isaz, please watch her. Don’t let her kill anybody by mistake…”

Isaz covered his mouth to muffle a laugh. Pretending to be serious, he said: “Don’t you worry. I’ll be on the lookout, but I can’t guarantee there won’t be any accidents.”

This time it was Kyra who had to pretend not to laugh. She liked Isaz; the experienced trapper was intelligent and had a sense of humor. She could understand now why Ikai trusted him to help him with complicated matters, such as weapons and the training of the young ones. At first Ikai had asked Urda to take over the training. It seemed natural, after all she had belonged

to the Guard of Urasis, the capital of the Third County, and had been martially trained all her life. She was an excellent soldier. But she had turned down the offer. She had not given any reason, but Kyra sensed it had to do with what had happened in the Eternal City. She was still not over the traumatic experience, and above all the death of her friend Lian. But the previous evening, to everybody's surprise, she had asked Ikai to let her take over the training. He had accepted, and Isaz was delighted to have someone with Urda's experience.

Kyra breathed in the damp, refreshing air with its forest scents, and a pleasant feeling came over her. Little by little they were beginning to recover, to heal, to get over what had happened… She sighed deeply. If only she could forget… but she could not. The nightmares would not let her. The oppression in her chest did not let her breathe normally either. It stopped her from filling her lungs, and was always with her. Ever since they had escaped from the claws of the Gods, nightmares had pursued her. She could barely sleep, and each night was torture. She spent more time awake than asleep. There were dark circles under her eyes every morning. And she could not shake off the nightmares. They were always very similar; they were fleeing from the Gods, pursued relentlessly by the Enforcers, and at the last moment, when they were just on the point of reaching freedom, they were caught, and Yosane died a painful death in her arms. Most nights it was Yosane who was killed by those heartless creatures, others it was Idana, or Urda, or even Ikai and Solma. The settings and the chases varied from night to night, but the end was always the same: her loved ones died horribly at the hands of the Gods. Kyra's soul could find no rest, and nighttime had become a torture she tried to avoid without success.

To her ears came the song of exotic birds, their black plumage streaked with red, flying over the forest to the east. She smiled. *At least you're completely free.* She put her hand to her chest, where the intangible weight remained.

She left the training fields behind and headed towards the river. She wanted to talk to Ikai, and she had been told he was helping with the building of the mill. As if her brother did not already have enough responsibilities and things to do. His will-power, his devotion, were utterly admirable. If he went on like that he would die, not at the hands of the Gods, their Enforcers, or the Regent, but from sheer exhaustion.

I love this brother of mine with all my heart, even though his ideas are sometimes the opposite of mine. And yes, there are days when I could bite off that head he analyzes everything with instead of letting his heart lead him, and I know he has a generous heart. It might be because we're siblings, and the truth is I couldn't have a better brother, however much I insist on denying it.

With those thoughts, and with the clear murmur of the river in her ears, she reached the building site. Twenty or so men were setting up a giant vertical wheel with troughs, all made of wood, on the side of a half-constructed building of adobe and stone. *What on earth are these lunatics doing? The current will drag them downriver!* They were pulling on ropes and pulleys, trying to fit the wheel on to a big wooden axle which entered the building through the half-wall which looked on to the river. On the count of three, the dozen men at the ropes pulled with all their might, while another four on the wall fitted the wheel using thick sticks as levers. Ikai was one of them. She held her breath. At the first attempt they failed, nearly losing control. The wheel was on the point of falling, dragging half the men with it.

It's going to kill them! It's too heavy! She ran towards them to help. At the second attempt the wheel rose to the level of the axle and with a tremendous effort the four men managed to fit it on. Kyra reached them as they broke into cheers and applause. *They found the strength to do it! It's unbelievable, but they did it!* The great wheel was turning as the troughs filled with the river water, driven by the current. The men laughed and hugged each other, looking on at their success.

Martin the miller turned to the others:

"Thank you all for your help! We now have a working water mill! It took hard work and lots of sweat, but it's something the whole village will benefit from. Now we'll be able to grind the cereals we harvest, and then later on we'll be able to drain the great swamps south of the river using the energy of the water. A great achievement, my friends, I really appreciate it. I couldn't have done it without your help."

The cheers rang out again, and Martin was raised to their shoulders like a hero.

Ikai saw Kyra and waved, she signaled to him to come down to her. Ikai dried his sweat with a dirty, torn cloth. He was wearing an old shirt

drenched in sweat and breeches of tanned leather. She found it strange to see him without the armor and clothing of a Hunter.

“Didn’t you have enough things to do already without taking up building?” was her greeting to her brother when he reached her.

He shrugged. “And pretty badly, at that! As Urda’s agreed to take over the martial training, some of my load’s been taken off me. Today they were putting the great wheel in place, and I came to lend a hand. I’m no good at building, but I can add a little brute force.” He turned his head in the direction of the group. “Look at them,” he said. “Free, building a future… happy for the first time in a very long time… that’s what I want for this place, for all of us.”

Kyra watched the joy of those men and understood: they had never had the chance to enjoy very much, if anything. They would remember this day forever because they had created it in freedom by themselves, through their own work and effort.

“So what’s my little sister doing here?” He watched her with half-closed eyes, tilting his head and studying her face. “You look tired. Are you all right?”

“Yeah… yeah. Don’t worry, it’s just that I didn’t sleep well.”

“You’re not resting properly? Why don’t you have a word with Idana? She can prepare some herbal infusion to help you sleep.”

“You’re right, I will.”

“You’re telling me I’m right? That’s a first,” he said with a smile.

Kyra replied with a mocking grimace. “I’m glad you’re in such good humor. That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“About my good humor?”

“No, empty-head! Not that, but about you being right,” she said with an affectionate shove. “You see… I know I make you angry… I want you to know I don’t do it on purpose, I don’t intend to cross you or upset you…”

“I know that.” His tone was serious now.

“It’s just that sometimes we see things so differently and… well, that makes us clash. Not because I want to, it just comes out and I can’t help it, above all with you, more than with anybody else.”

“How lucky I am!” he said with a half-smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“You’re my older brother. You have to put up with me.”

“What else can I do?” he said, rolling his eyes.

She sighed heavily. “I know I’m impulsive, and that I feel more than I think. They’re not qualities that exactly fill me with pride, I have to admit, but that’s what I’m like. I try to control myself, and you know it, but I don’t always manage to, particularly when I argue with you. But that doesn’t mean I’m against you, or that I don’t approve of what you’re trying to do. On the contrary, I’m very proud of you, of all you’re doing for us, for all these people, and I want you to know it.”

“Thanks… you leave me speechless… so why are you telling me all this? There’s no need, we’re siblings, we know what we’re like… Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, I do need to. I must say it or else I’ll burst. I want you to know that I’m grateful for what you did… for doing the impossible to rescue me, for going to the end of the world to find me and bring me back.”

“You really don’t have to… besides, you would’ve done the same for me.”

“I’d like to think I would, although I really don’t know. And I *do* have to be grateful. You dropped everything, you faced a thousand and one dangers to rescue me, you risked your life continually, you went to the Eternal City, you fought Hunters, Enforcers and Gods, and you found me. You brought me back home safe and sound. Nobody could wish for a better brother, nobody.” There were tears in her eyes. “And I want you to know I love you, that you’re the best brother in the whole world and that I’ll never, ever forget everything you did, what you go on doing, for me, for Mother, for all of us.”

Ikai was speechless, with his mouth hanging open. “Are you sure you’re… all right, Kyra? What’s up? I’ve never seen you like this.”

She dried her tears on the cuff of her sleeve and blew her nose. “I’ll get over it, don’t worry. I just… I just want you to know… don’t think I’m an ingrate who jumps at your throat at the first sign we’re seeing things differently.” She hugged him tightly and gave him a sisterly kiss on the cheek.

When she moved away, her eyes moist, he looked at her and smiled. “You must have slept very little these days… I barely recognize you…

you'd better run to see Idana. Tell her I want my wild, stubborn sister back, I don't recognize this one here."

Kyra laughed amid her tears. "Don't worry, you'll soon have her back, and then you'll be sorry you asked."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of that," he replied, smiling from ear to ear. "And now go away. I'm still half dizzy from this unusual display of affection."

She began to move away, but he called her back. She turned and saw her brother holding up the pendant with the carved sea-horse he always wore round his neck, the one she had given him for his eighteenth birthday.

"You're always with me," he said, with a wink.

Kyra brought hers out, the identical one, and held it up for him to see. "And you with me."

She headed upriver. It seemed to her that the oppression in her chest had lightened, and she felt she could breathe more easily. She smiled. *Yes, I think talking to him was the right thing to do, even though I poured my guts out all over him. I believe it was part of what I needed to do… My poor brother, I bet he won't get over the shock I've given him till winter*.

With the intention of easing her spirit, she followed the river northwards and went into the jungle. At once she was surrounded by flora both vivid and beautiful. The lushness of the landscape was overwhelming. The whole island was a masterpiece of Nature. Kyra made her way through the wild plants, enjoying their exotic scents, until she came to a small wild waterfall. The jet of water seemed to fall from the sky itself with pure, crystal water. Every time she visited this place she was tempted to open her mouth, tilt her head back and let the water fall over her. The cataract broke into a clear lagoon decorated with plants, not unlike water lilies, which she did not recognize. Ever since she had discovered this little paradise, she visited it whenever she could and swam in the surprisingly warm water.

A swim will invigorate me, she thought, and walked over to the lagoon. She looked down at her clothes. She was wearing a red tunic which came down to her thighs, held at the waist by a wide leather belt. Under the tunic she wore black leather breeches and tanned leather boots which had seen better times. She was reaching for the belt-buckle when she heard a slight sound to her right. Instinctively, without moving, she glanced in the

direction of the sound. Beside a tree some seven paces away, she could make out a black figure. She did not think twice. In a smooth brisk move she reached behind her for one of the two throwing knives she carried at her belt and launched it toward the threat with a powerful twist of her hip.

The knife stuck in the tree, two fingers from Albana's head.

"You're pretty good at throwing a knife," the brunette said, hardly flinching. She eyed the weapon beside her face.

"Sorry!" Kyra apologized at once when she recognized her. "I thought you were a black panther, or some other wild animal."

Albana gave her typical roguish smile. "I see you attack first and ask questions afterwards. Good attitude, it avoids problems."

Kyra smiled at the sarcastic reproach. "You might have made your presence known…"

"I'm one of those who don't announce themselves," she said with a wink.

"I see I'm not the only one who likes this place."

"It really is wonderful," Albana admitted.

"Or have you been following me?" Kyra was beginning to suspect this was not a chance encounter.

"You're smart, very smart, like your brother."

"I'm not much like my brother at all. He's a thinker, I'm a doer, but I'll take the compliment whichever way. What do you want of me?"

"Just to talk. We haven't had the chance to get to know each other too well…"

"Ikai's told me about you. He's told me quite a few things, about how you helped him, and Liriana."

"I see. And was there anything in what he told you that caught your attention?"

"Yes, you're not like the rest of us… you're something different… you're a hybrid."

"I wasn't sure whether he'd told you or not, but I see your brother keeps no secrets from you."

“He keeps one or two, but this one he told me about. He says you’re capable of killing the Enforcers of the Gods, that you’re powerful and lethal. My brother doesn’t often exaggerate, least of all on this subject, so I believe him.”

“It’s best not to believe anything anybody says,” Albana said. She pulled the knife out of the tree, held it by the tip with two fingers and looked at Kyra. In what seemed to be slow motion she threw the knife up between the trees. Surprised, Kyra followed the weapon’s trajectory with her gaze. The knife rose, then turned and began its descent with a lethal whistle. Kyra was suddenly afraid. It was coming right at her! She was just about to step back when the knife buried itself in the ground between her feet.

“By all the seas!” she cried, her eyes wide.

“I’m also a Shadow, the best Shadow in fact. I’ve been trained to melt into the twilight, to become part of the night, to kill with the brush of a glance. Take the knife and throw it at me.”

“It’s not necessary… I believe you.”

“No, that’s not what I want to show you. Throw it at me.”

Kyra eyed her hesitantly, but Albana looked like certainty personified. She was waiting serenely in front of the tree. Kyra picked up the knife, drew her arm back and got ready. Albana did not even blink. At the moment when the arm began its throw, a black flash ran through her body. The knife flew toward the brunette’s chest. The distance was too short for it to miss. Kyra feared the worst. At the last instant Albana’s body, her silhouette, seemed to turn hazy and dark, like black smoke. When the metal tip reached the body, it vanished before Kyra’s incredulous eyes. The knife went through the black mist and embedded itself in the tree with a muffled thud.

Kyra’s mouth fell open. “How… how is that even possible?”

The black mist moved to the right, blurred and shapeless. And all of a sudden Albana appeared from it. “This is what I wanted to show you,” she said with a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

Kyra was so amazed she stumbled back a couple of steps.

“Now you know what I am: an exceptional anomaly: a hybrid with Power, one of the few who exist. The blood of the Gods and of Men runs through my veins. But the most important thing is that I have Power,

something that very rarely happens. Do you see? Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Kyra remembered Notaplo's experiment, and his explanations about hybrids.

"Yes, Notaplo, the Erudite of the House of Eret, explained it to me."

"Curious that he should."

Kyra shrugged.

Albana went on: "Along with the Power come other abilities which can't be explained logically. Abilities I've developed ever since I was recruited to be a Shadow, in the service of Oskas, the Master Spy of the House of Aureb. He's the one you confronted on that beach, before you got away. Do you remember?"

The image of the sinister individual who had tried to kill Notaplo came to her mind. She nodded.

"As to being able to kill an Enforcer… yes, I can, and I've done it. Now you know firsthand, although I find it interesting that your brother should pay me all these compliments. I'll have to thank him."

"Why are you telling me this? You're not one to reveal information, particularly something as important and secret as this."

"See how smart you are? Because I want something from you."

"What's that…?"

"Ikai told me the God Adamis gave you an object, one with power, before you crossed the portal."

Kyra noticed Albana's eyes were staring at her chest. "You mean this?" she said, and brought out the object she carried inside her tunic in a little sachet around her neck.

"Yes. That."

"How did you know I had it with me, around my neck?"

"I can feel its Power emanate like a pulse… ethereal… I'm sensitive to the Power. It reaches me and I recognize it. Can you uncover it?"

Kyra took it out of the sachet and put it in the palm of her hand. The crystalline disc with the big golden pip at the center looked completely unnatural in the middle of that jungle, the pond and the waterfall.

“There’s a lot of Power within it.” Albana put her hand over the disc which covered Kyra’s hand. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. A dull gleam came from the disc.

“An ancient Power, belonging to one of the first families. This disc, this pip, holds the Power of the House of Eret. It must be the Power of Adamis himself, the Prince of the House. It has to be. I can’t see any other explanation, since he was the one who gave it to you himself.”

Kyra was staring at her blankly.

“You don’t see it, do you? This disc, this pip to be precise, is imbued with the Power of one of the most powerful Gods. It’s extremely valuable. In fact I can’t explain how he came to give it to you. It’s a Power he’ll never get back; he’s given you time from his own life… I don’t understand it. A God never gives away Power, much less someone of the Royalty, since every drop is a period of life he loses from his own existence.”

“Do you mean to say Adamis has consumed some of what’s left of his existence, and given it to me in the form of Power?”

“Yes, and it’s something I can’t figure out. Gods kill for Power. They avoid using it whenever they can as it shortens their long lives, and they never give it away, never. I know that very well. It would be as though you were to give someone a couple of days of the life you have left, for them to enjoy. Although for us it’s a difficult concept to grasp, given that our lives are short and hazardous. A God’s life is long and stable. It’s not often cut off earlier than nine hundred years, except because of wars between the Houses, and when that happens it’s the lower castes who pay. Never the castes in Power, or a royal family.”

“He told me I’d need it…”

“It’s an extremely valuable gift, even though for the moment you may not understand its significance.”

“Why are you explaining all this to me?”

Albana smiled. “Because I want to make sure of one thing. Adamis would never have given this disc to just any slave. For two reasons. The first one I’ve just told you about: its value. The second, because he’d never give it to a human being. For an ordinary man it’s nothing more than an object. Ordinary human beings can’t interact with its Power.”

Kyra shook her head and frowned. “I don’t follow you.”

“I think you do. When you fled the Eternal City, the portal led you to an underground temple, a temple sealed by the Gods. How did you manage to break the seal and come to the surface?”

“I… the disc…” Kyra began. Her mind was suddenly assailed by doubts, blurred memories which had been tormenting her since their return. Once again, she remembered Notaplo’s experiment with Arga. She remembered the rune she had been given: the same one the slave Marcus had. She remembered Notaplo’s words: *Marcus and you are the same type of hybrid.* Kyra felt immense fear run through her, and her skin turned to goose-flesh.

“You used the disc to open the doors of the temple, didn’t you?”

Kyra nodded heavily. “I don’t know how I did it. I had the disc in my hand, and I only wanted to get out of there. I remember I held the disc hard in front of the door and banged my hand against the metal… I don’t know how it happened. I felt very strange, as though I had a fever… and that was when it happened. A golden flash came out of the disc, and the door opened.”

Albana half-closed her eyes. “That’s what I suspected.”

“The Power of the disc must have been activated with the blow.”

“No, Kyra, the Power can’t be invoked like that. It must be summoned, and by someone with Divine blood in their veins. Men can’t do it, only the Gods… and hybrids like me… like you…”

“No, that’s impossible. I can’t be like you.”

“I very much fear it’s the only explanation.”

“Isn’t there any other way to use the discs?”

“Not without a specific object to manipulate it with. A Gauntlet of Power made by the Gods, like the ones the Eyes-of-the-Gods use – and you weren’t wearing one.”

“Then it must have been an accident.”

“Adamis didn’t give you the disc *by accident*, he knew perfectly well you’d be able to use it. Otherwise he’d never have wasted the Power that’s held in that disc.”

Kyra was shaking her head, waving her arms, denying what was obviously logical, but which her soul refused to admit.

“There’s a way of knowing the truth. That is, if you want to find out, obviously…”

Kyra wrinkled her nose and grunted through her teeth: “All right, then! Let’s find out the truth!”

Albana grasped Kyra’s right hand and put the disc on her palm. Then she took her left hand and brought out a black dagger. “Don’t be afraid,” she told her, and made a cut in her palm. The blood began to run down her hand and drip on to the ground. Albana placed Kyra’s bleeding hand over the disc, and the drops spattered on the crystalline surface. The crystal seemed to absorb the blood, so thousands of tiny veins appeared, carrying the blood to the golden pip in its center. When the blood reached it, there came a golden flash which lit up the whole lagoon. The disc rose and remained suspended in the air above Kyra’s hand, emitting a curious vibration.

“It’s been activated,” Albana said. “Now close your eyes, concentrate, and let it into your mind.”

When Kyra did this, she felt the energy of the disc interacting with her mind. She felt a shiver when she noticed that not only was her mind being invaded, but her body too. A sharp tingling began to run up and down her flesh. She was not sure what was happening, but she felt fear, fear of the unknown, of that arcane power which was running through her.

“Easy… nothing’s going to happen to you, don’t resist the Power. Let it penetrate your whole system.”

A golden gleam ran through Kyra’s body. She almost fell backwards from the shock.

“What’s going on? What’s it doing to me?”

“The symbiosis has taken effect. Now you’re one, the Power in that disc and you. You’re joined together. It’ll let you use it.”

Kyra could not take her eyes off the golden pip. She felt a strange attraction to it, as if it were asking her to speak to it, to interact with it.”

“Close your eyes, focus on that piece of gold in the center of the disc. Ask it to generate a small wave in the water of the lagoon.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Do as I say. The Power feeds on the five elements of nature, and it’s more likely to interact with them. It’s water, you’ll be able to do it.”

“This is insane,” she protested. “It’ll never work. How am I going to do that?” But Albana’s stern gesture interrupted her objections. She concentrated and imagined she was throwing a pebble into the lagoon, one which would make a ripple on the surface of the water.

There came a blinding flash from the disc, then suddenly the water in the middle of the lagoon shot up to the sky with a great explosion, as if a giant rock had fallen into the center of the lake from the sky.

“By the darkness!” cried Albana. She took a step back.

Kyra fell backwards from the shock and remained sitting on her backside.

“It was just a pebble!” she protested, shaking her head so her fiery hair shook with it.

Albana fixed her black eyes on Kyra’s ruby ones. “The Power in that disc, Adamis’s Power, just as I imagined, is very powerful. But there’s something else going on here…”

“Something else?”

“Yes, it’s not only the disc that’s powerful, you’re powerful too, and that’s something I wasn’t expecting.”

“That’s impossible! I tell you, I’m just like everybody else! I’m not like you!”

Albana turned and gestured at the lake.

“It was the disc, not me!”

“You can deny it all you want, or you can accept what we both know has happened here. That’s your choice.”

“I’m the daughter of Solma and Siul, Ikai’s sister, and I’m a Senoca. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“As you wish, but if you should change your mind, and I hope you do, for your own good and everyone else’s, you know where to find me.”

The brunette spun round on herself amid a glitter of black sparks and vanished the same way she had appeared.

“Damn you, Adamis! Why did you give me this disc? What for? What do you want of me?”

Kneeling there, staring at the disc as it shone with a faint golden luminosity on the ground in front of her, she wished she had never met the God-Prince. A moment later she regretted the thought. She picked up the disc, put it back in its little bag and hung it round her neck.

Damn!

Chapter 6

Karm's pick hit the rocky wall strongly and precisely, on the vein of the precious mineral. The muscles of his body were aching, he was very tired. He had been working all day, and his arm and back were beginning to give up under the weight of exhaustion. The sound of the metal tip of the tool as it hit the rocky surface was barely audible to him as he had spent many years of forced labor in that mine: too many. He struck again; if he managed to get hold of the shining metal he would be allowed to go back to the surface, would see and feel the sun, even if it was only for a few hours.

"Don't spoil it, for Oxatsi's sake!" came Honus' voice in warning by his side.

Karm tried to see his friend's face, but the gloom at that depth was so intense that he could barely make him out. He turned his head towards the two torches by the entrance to the narrow tunnel behind him. They were burning, consuming part of the scarce air which reached them at that level, yet their light extended less than two paces away. Half-blind as they were from the prolonged lack of light, this was little use to them. Although as long as they burnt, they knew they would not die of asphyxia. Karm's gaze wandered over the rest of the narrow corridor, propped up by beams. He could vaguely identify the dirty figures of the other twenty or so of his fellow workmen. In the north tunnel there were forty, who had been working in it for a month. In the east tunnel another fifty were propping up the access and trying to reach the new veins. More than two hundred slaves were working in that section of the giant mine alone. *Dig or die*: that was the law of the mine. In that labyrinth of tunnels and corridors at different levels of the mountain's innards, more than fifteen hundred Senoca worked ceaselessly to evade death. Karm gave a resentful snort. *Bloody Gods and their ruthless Enforcers! If there was some way of confronting them, if I could find out how…*

The rhythmic sound of the picks hitting the wall echoed like a melancholic melody which bounced off the walls and filled the hollow space with its rancid air. Karm focused on the vein and wiped away the sweat running down his face.

“Don’t worry, it’s our pass to the surface,” he assured his friend. “I won’t fail.”

“You’d better not. We’ve been down here for six weeks. If we don’t go back up soon, we’ll end up blind as moles.”

The crack of a punishing rod behind him startled Karm. His body cringed, and tension held him tight as he waited for the pain that would follow the fateful sound.

“Argh!” Honus cried out beside him.

The punishment had fallen on his partner. The brutal lashes were a constant torture they had to live with. Many did not succeed. Their wounds became infected, dooming them to a dreadful death marked with fever and suffering. They could never tell when punishment would fall or who would receive it, but it was always there, a constant threat looming over their backs, like the sinister figure which dispensed it, always prowling near: the accursed Tormentor.

“Put your backs into it!” cried the Tormentor. His hollow, powerful voice echoed off the tunnel walls.

The second blow of the long metallic rod, with its barbed star at the tip, fell full on Honus’ back. He fell to his knees at once, putting his hands on his head to avoid receiving a third blow from the creature whose mission was to turn their existence into a continual agony as he ensured that all the slaves of the section performed as he expected. Seeing his friend subdued, Karm tasted the acid mixture of rage and frustration which always overwhelmed him when the Enforcers carried out their merciless abuses. Covertly, he watched the Tormentor. The first thing that always caught his attention when he saw them was their punishing eyes: an incandescent red which seemed to burn like embers, bringing terror to the heart of whoever dared look at them. They were short compared to a man, but very sturdy. Their upper body was huge, their shoulders robust, their arms extremely strong and muscular. Their skin was the characteristic ochre of the Enforcers, though somewhat more metallic, with the swollen veins which

ran through their bodies seeming to carry liquid silver. Their heads were always covered with sinister brown helmets. Over their mouths and noses were round openings, which together with the burning eyes gave them the appearance of monsters from the depths of the earth. They wore long brown robes with black padded corselets, which protected them from blows and falls of earth. But what Karm hated the most about them were the long punishment rods they wielded so adeptly. They were creatures of the Gods who – unlike the Executors – seemed to have been created to subsist in those depths, and they very rarely went to the surface.

Most of the Senoca knew nothing of their existence until they reached the mines, their underground realm, where they were lords and masters. Some people said they were blind and were guided by sounds, like bats or moles, but nobody knew for sure, and many refused to believe it, since their rods never missed a back. What nobody doubted was their cruelty, and their total lack of pity.

“Keep working!” the Tormentor ordered as he moved toward the group of slaves on the north face. Karm let out his breath when he saw him leave and crouched down beside Honus.

“Are you all right?” he whispered.

“Yeah, just like a bird flying in a summer sky,” grumbled Honus.

Karm grinned. Punishment would not break his friend’s spirit; they had taken many blows from that hated rod, and although the body still suffered, in the mind it was now a little less painful. *It’s amazing what the body can get used to.*

Honus got up. There was pain on his face. “Let’s go on. Make sure we get hold of the Star Crystal.”

“Have I ever failed you, cross-patch?”

Honus grunted. “Not in the ten years we’ve been in this bloody mine. But there’s always a first time, and I wouldn’t want it to be today, not when I’ve already had a mark of affection from the Tormentor.”

“In that case get the chisel and container ready, and don’t distract me with those endless complaints of yours.”

Karm relaxed his shoulders and shook his arms. He had to relax his muscles before attacking the vein. First he worked on the surrounding area, clearing it so that he could extract the rare mineral. He did not know what

the Enforcers used that very fragile material for, with all the extreme delicacy that was need for extracting and handling it, but what he did know was that it was more precious to them than gold and silver.

“I’m ready,” Honus said.

“Chisel. I’m going to start.”

He inhaled the rancid air deeply, then exhaled to relax the tension in his tired muscles. Very carefully, so as not to ruin the vein with a careless blow or a treacherous slip, he began the extraction. Among themselves the slaves called the mineral Star Crystal, since it sparkled like the stars on a clear night and was equally unreachable – more so at that depth – and as fragile as the most delicate crystal which only a few expert craftsmen were capable of working.

“Come on, you sluggards!” boomed the hollow voice of the Tormentor as his rod of terror descended on another of the slaves, who fell to his knees. He struck again and then, still not satisfied, hit him once again.

Karm watched the cruel punishment. He recognized the slave from his complexion: it was Oltas the singer. He had been there nearly as long as they had themselves, which was exceptional, since he and Honus were the longest-serving in the mine. This was a real feat considering the high casualty rate. Oltas was tough, used to the punishment and the extreme harshness of life in the mine, but in the last month he had fallen ill and was now weak. He usually hummed songs from the First County during the lunch break and before they slept, and entertained them all, bringing a little cheer to their sad hearts in that place of perpetual darkness and suffering. But it was weeks now since he had sung, which was a very bad sign. Karm remembered that since the day they were all taken down to that section of the mine, a gang of fifty men, almost a score had perished on that shift. How many others had died in the other tunnels he had no idea, but the casualties would be similar. They always were. He sighed. *Hold on, Oltas, don’t give up, don’t let them destroy you,* he said to himself, wishing his prayers might help the poor wretch, although he knew that wishing, praying or begging were next to useless down there.

“Come on, Karm, let’s finish. There’s nothing you can do for him.”

“Bastards…” Karm murmured under his breath.

“Concentrate, by the guts of all the damned Enforcers!”

“All right… I’d gladly tear their guts out myself.”

“Maybe one day your dream will come true, but it won’t be today. Today we earn the pass to the surface, even if I have to get the crystal out with my teeth.”

Karm breathed out his rage. “All right. Let’s do it.”

Several hours later, when their shift ended, with infinite care so that the clusters of crystal would not break, they carried the precious cargo to the upper chamber, where the Eye-of-the-God on duty was in charge of the operation. Karm fixed his eyes on him. He wore a strange silver robe hemmed in gold and with unreadable runes engraved on it, which covered his whole body except for his arms. He noticed the repellent skin of the monster, a tanned ochre marked by dark swollen veins. In them, it was said, ran pure hatred instead of blood.

“Kneel!” he ordered in his shrill voice the moment they walked in.

They did as they were told at once, head on the ground, showing submission before the Enforcer, who was escorted by four Tormentors.

“Bring me the container,” he told the Tormentors.

Karm did not know where the sound came from, as the Eye’s head was always encased in that sinister metallic helmet. The back of the helmet was golden. The front part was made up of two silver triangles, vertical, symmetrical and identical, one of them covering the right side of the face and the other the left. They were separated by a tiny golden strip.

One of the Tormentors approached and gave the Enforcer the container which held the mineral. He took it over to the Eye, who calmly weighed the contents on a vertical scale on his left, then made a note in the silver book he carried.

“Pass to the surface granted. Three days,” he announced.

Honus sighed with relief. That night his big friend would not complain any more. They retreated on all fours, giving thanks as submissive slaves ought to, until they reached the cavern by the elevator. The silvery metal cage could hold thirty or so men. It was the only means out of that gloomy abyss, and was always escorted by half a dozen Tormentors. One Eye-of-the-Gods maneuvered it from the inside, making several daily trips to the surface. It was impossible to escape from there, not without facing those abominations. Among the slaves there was a story about a gang of thirty

miners who had tried to take an elevator. They had failed. Their heads were skewered on pikes at the entrance to the mine. Nobody had ever tried again.

“Let’s go,” said Honus. “Tomorrow it’ll be our turn,”

They ate their allotted portion, enough to keep them alive and working, although Karm knew that always eating that same muck would end up killing them. Or if not, then it would be the putrid air which poisoned their lungs, the constant cave-ins, the unbridled torture of the Tormentors, the exhaustion of body and mind, or the lack of hope. *As tempting a prospect as you could hope for,* Karm thought, then checked himself: he was beginning to think more and more like Honus.

The twenty-odd souls huddled together, wrapped in old linen blankets. It was at this time that Oltas used to entertain them, but tonight he would not. Not tonight or any other night; his dead body lay on the ground beside the pot of stew. He had died amid convulsions.

“I’ll miss him,” Honus said. “He sang well.”

“We all will. He was practically the only thing that cheered us up down here.”

“The bastards.”

“One day… they’ll pay.”

“You should stop dreaming about that. It’s impossible.”

“I’d rather be a dreamer than a grumbler,” Karm replied to his friend.

“Dreamers end up dead. Us grumblers, we live longer.”

“You might be right there.”

“Course I am!”

Karm eyed his comrade with a half-smile. Honus’ face, lit up by the dancing light of the torches, returned it. His dark eyes and lank, jet-black hair framed a strong chin and forehead which already showed its first wrinkles, even though he was only thirty. But the most remarkable thing about the grumbler was not his character but his powerful build. He was very tall, a head taller than most of the men, and extremely strong: his back and his shoulders were massive. Besides, his energy seemed never to run out, which had allowed him to survive forced labor for so long. His continual complaints and curses enabled him to bear the endless tiredness, constant punishment and hopelessness in that filthy well.

“It’s time to get a little sleep. Tomorrow we’ll leave this stinking hole and see the sun. It’s going to be a great day.”

Karm nodded; it would be a good day. He lay down beside the giant and began to rub his body. He was very tired, as he always was; he reached the end of each day with his strength drained. His arm and leg muscles ached from the effort. He was not as strong as his friend, although after ten years of using pick, hammer and chisel his shoulders and arms were now powerful. His legs were less so, and every night he rubbed them so he would not suffer agonies the following day. In that gloom, and with the dirt and rock dust they raised every day, his hair, which used to be blond and bright, was now dark, as was his skin, which had once been as white as chalk. His eyes, sky blue, were now dulled and looked the color of autumn. He had been taken to the mine when he had just turned eighteen, and for ten years all he had known was twilight, exhaustion and agony, both physical and mental. But he refused to give up hope, to die in that ill-omened place without having freed himself from the chains of slavery. Without having obtained the justice he was owed: not to himself, but to the one he had been robbed of and whose life had been cut short.

“Let’s sleep, my friend, and dream.”

They woke as they did every morning, to the loud sound of the metallic rods of the Tormentors vying with the summoning bell. Karm and Honus went straight to the elevator. The Eye-of-the-God glanced at them, then at his book, and indicated to the Tormentors that they should let them in. When they entered they saw Oltas’ body in a corner, piled on top of other poor wretches who had also suffered the same fate. Karm felt his blood boil. He was on the point of opening his mouth to protest when Honus’ huge hand grasped his arm tightly. The pain stopped him from saying anything, and though he was not happy about this he knew he would be thankful later on. Addressing an Eye inappropriately meant death. Honus gave him a warning look, and Karm turned his own eyes downward. They knelt in a corner, and the Eye activated the levers of the pulley mechanism. The great metallic cage began to rise, amid shrill creaking. They went up for more than two hours, stopping at some of the other levels to pick up other lucky ones like themselves, but mostly corpses. By the time they reached the surface the elevator had become a great iron coffin.

When at last they left the elevator they found themselves inside a wooden, windowless building. The daylight crept in through the cracks and hurt their eyes with its piercing brilliance. They were led to a corner, where they remained prostrate while their eyes tried to adjust to the blinding light.

“How long will it take us to get used to the light? It’s bloody killing me” Honus grumbled.

“I thought it was what you wanted most,” Karm replied, half-joking.

“By all the seas they stole from us! Not this, I want to go out without ending up blind!”

“Quiet, slaves, or you’ll go back down!” came the shrill voice of an Eye, followed by savage lashes from several Tormentors.

They all kept quiet and lay down on the floor. It took them the whole morning to get their eyes used to the light. They did so gradually, until they were able to look through the cracks and see the world outside where the sun shone strongly.

At last the big gate of the hut opened and the light flooded in. With arms and hands protecting their eyes from the brightness, they emerged into the open. At the touch of the warm sun on his moist, blackened skin Karm felt reborn. *I’d give anything to be able to enjoy this in freedom.*

“This sun’s burning my eyes!” Honus cried beside him. “But by Oxatsi, it’s doing my soul good!”

They were led to an enclosed area and locked in. Beside them the pack-horses were kept in big wooden pens, and further down the ones that pulled the carts. From the stench around them and the hay under their feet, Karm guessed their enclosure was used for the same purpose. In front of them was an open area with several large wooden buildings, and nearly five hundred slaves who were occupied in supporting tasks. But further away, remote from the suffering of the Senoca, rose the high mountains with their covering of green, the rocky slopes rising to the skies, the blue sky which filled everything around with life. The coolness of the mountain air tousled his hair and blessed his lungs. He nearly choked and coughed, used as he was to the rancid, poisonous air inside the mine. Honus was smiling from ear to ear, filling his enormous chest with the rich air.

“Look at that landscape, the air, the scents of coolness and life on the breeze from the woods. How long I’ve waited to be able to enjoy this

again!”

“Yes, it’s a delight. A wonder every man ought to be able to enjoy in freedom.”

“And in bloody peace!” Honus exclaimed. His eyes were on the three Executors who were keeping watch on the enclosures.

Karm too looked at them. It was so long since he had seen them that he hardly remembered them. For some unknown reason they never went down into the mine, but always stayed above ground. The underworld belonged to the Tormentors.

So close to freedom, I can almost touch it with my fingertips, he said to himself. All he had to do was jump the fences −which though high were not high enough to keep them in −and run like crazy to the forest. Once there they could hide in the thick vegetation and disappear. Then he noticed the Executor by the gate in the fence. He was enormous, as big as Honus, and equally muscular under the swollen veins on his ochre skin. The idea of escaping died within him; he would never reach the edge of the trees, where he could make out several Executors posted. A spear in the back or stomach would be his end. He had seen it happen before.

The day started to cloud over rapidly, and a storm appeared menacingly on the horizon. Honus’ face twisted, and he began to curse. Suddenly he fell silent and stood looking at the approach-route from the east.

He pointed. “Look, more meat for the grinder,” he said.

An endless line of slaves which trailed away around the foot of the mountain was coming up to the checkpoint at the mine entrance.

“New Quota of miners…” Karm said, watching the procession.

Karm counted more than five hundred men with an Eye-of-the-Gods at their head. Their hands were tied behind their backs and they were escorted by numerous Executors.

“The poor wretches have no idea of the fate that’s awaiting them.”

Karm nodded. He felt deeply downhearted.

Honus noticed this. “Don’t let this affect you. Enjoy your reward; we earned it the hard way. Soon we’ll be back in the abyss, picking at rock in the dark, breathing poisoned air and getting our daily punishment. Enjoy

this air, this landscape, for they'll soon disappear and you'll regret not having done it while you could."

Karm nodded. He knew Honus was right, but he found it hard to savor the moment knowing the horror which awaited those men. While the two friends tried to enjoy their reward, they watched the process of selection and marking. The Eye in charge ordered the first slave to come near. The Enforcer's helmet separated into two halves, which moved sideways. In it appeared the ominous blue and golden Eye which seemed capable of reading the soul of men. The hair on the back of Karm's neck stood on end. A powerful light came out of the eye and swept over the slave, from top to toe. The Enforcer wrote something in his silver book and gestured at one of the Executors around him. Without a word, the Executor pierced the heart of the man with his spear, he died before he even realized what had happened. The Enforcer then dragged the corpse to a huge pit and threw it in. Filled with rage, Karm grasped one of the wooden posts of the fence. He would have given anything to have been able to pull it out of the ground and skewer that monster with it.

Honus shook his head. "They soon start to disqualify the weak and ailing, the bastards. But then this is no ordinary mine, not like the coal or silver or gold mines. Here they only want the strongest, those who can survive the longest to get hold of their cursed Star Crystal. Many of them'll never even get as far as being marked with the miners' symbol." He gestured at the symbol of a Mole engraved on his Ring.

Honus was right. Until nightfall, under the threat of the approaching storm, they watched the useful slaves being selected and then led to a large hut. They would be marked the following day, with the symbol of the Mole being engraved over the one they already had. A painful process which Karm remembered well enough, even after so long. The pit was now filled with corpses; almost a quarter of the newly arrived were now in it. Karm had counted them, even though he knew it would only cause him pain. It was early morning when they were doused with oil and torches were thrown on them so that they would burn. He had to close his eyes, raging impotently. The Enforcers retired, leaving the corpses burning.

"Get some sleep," Honus said. "There's nothing we can do about those poor wretches."

“They’ve been sacrificed like sick animals. We can’t let them go on doing this to our people.”

“Oh, yes? And what on earth can we do? We’re penned in like mares and there are Executors on guard. Let it be, or else you’ll end up like them.”

The breeze turned into a strong wind, and the threatening storm reached them at last.

“To hell with it! This is just what we needed! The one night we’re free to spend outside and it has to rain! The bloody Gods and my stinking luck!”

His friend’s fury made Karm smile, and for a moment he forgot both where he was and the tragedy around them. There came a terrible blast of thunder, and they glanced up at the cloudy sky. A great lightning bolt zigzagged down at dizzying speed and struck one side of the mountain.

“Awesome!” Honus said, open-mouthed.

The sky now filled with a display of thunderclaps accompanied by fierce lightning, and the winds lashed the surface with intensified fury. The horses began to snort in terror, and things started to turn tenser; the storm was an unusually strong one. Suddenly a great bolt fell on the wooden building beside the pens where the supporting slaves were sleeping. Karm’s blood froze as he saw the tremendous destructive power which sent the roof flying off in the wind. A moment later the building was burning with big flames. The doors were locked from the outside, so that the slaves were unable to get out. The screams of horror inside the building were chilling; the flames were surely going to devour them. The Executors reached the doors and finally opened them. The slaves came out fleeing from the fire, some with their bodies aflame, screaming in agony. In the blink of an eye the whole building was burning like an enormous funeral pyre as the slaves ran for their lives.

Caught up by panic, the horses bolted. They began to kick wildly and throw themselves against the fences in an attempt to escape from the approaching flames. The pen broke and the horses stampeded, sweeping aside the two Executors on guard. When they realized what was happening Karm looked at Honus, then at the clear route which now opened ahead of them in the direction of the forest.

“We can’t go on being a race of slaves forever. We have to escape, we have to fight.”

Honus shook his head and growled.

“Come on, my friend, I know this is all you know now, but come with me and we’ll find freedom.”

“We’re more likely to die.”

“Better to die fighting to reach freedom than here as slaves.”

Honus thought for a moment. “You’re right. Let’s fight. Let the seas take them like the plague they are!”

Karm hugged his friend. “Thanks.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“We’ll go in search of the red hand, the resistance, and join them.”

“Are you sure they exist?”

“That’s what rumor says, and I certainly hope so.”

Honus scratched his black beard. “Well then, what the hell are we waiting for?” he roared.

“Let’s go!” Karm said crisply.

The two men escaped towards the forest under the cover of night, leaving behind the chaos caused by the flames: a chaos which was but an omen of what was yet to come.

Chapter 7

When Kyra came to Idana's house, she found her tending to a child whose head was bleeding.

"I don't know what to do with him," the mother was explaining. "He won't stay still for a moment."

"It's not serious, only a cut in the head. It just looks worse because of the amount of blood."

"What on earth were you thinking of, climbing that tree?" the mother scolded. "Haven't I told you a thousand times to be careful? Look what happened, you almost killed yourself!"

The child was no longer crying, but the marks left by the tears on his dirty face were clear.

"Take heed of what your mother says," Kyra said.

The boy recognized Kyra and nodded energetically.

"Hi Kyra, welcome," Idana said with a smile.

"Hello, Freckles," Kyra returned. It was the nickname she had given her friend.

The boy's mother knelt before Kyra.

"For the love of Oxatsi! How often do I have to tell you not to kneel in front of me or give me any special treatment! I'm just another Senoca, like you."

"Yes, of course… I'm sorry…"

Idana smiled from ear to ear. "They're getting used to me, but of course that's because they come to me pretty often. Our Shelter protects them from Gods and Regents, but with illnesses and wounds it's different. Even here it's difficult to stay away from them."

"Go on before the kid faints. He's very pale."

Idana nodded. “But he’ll bear up like the brave Senoca warrior he is. Wont you, my lad?”

The boy bit his lip and nodded firmly. Kyra watched Idana’s expert hands working on the injury. How fortunate they were to have her there with them. Nobody else had any knowledge of healing, at least beyond the basic remedies Senoca grandmothers taught to the mothers, who in turn taught their daughters. Kyra looked around the house which now served as the Shelter’s hospital. One part was of stone, and this was where Idana lived. Here were her shelves full of hundreds of jars and pots containing different plants, herbs and medicinal substances of all kinds, some even of animal origin. With them were the bowls, mortars and pestles, retorts and containers that she needed. Whenever Kyra had tried to help Idana prepare the potions and balms she dispensed, she had been awed by her knowledge and skill.

The other, wooden, part of the building was the hospital: more of an improvised extension where a dozen cots had been installed, along with equipment for the more serious injuries and illnesses. Luckily it was usually empty. But it would not always be so. *We must be thankful to Oxatsi for Idana. Me most of all, because she’s the best of friends. And more than that, she’s the kindest person I know, someone who’d jump into a crocodile-infested river to save a stranger.* Thinking this made her aware that she must take good care of Idana; she was her best friend, and after what had happened to Yosane she could not bear losing her too. *I’ll have to make sure she doesn’t jump into a river, or come to any other kind of harm. I’ll have to keep an eye on her and look after her well. That’s what friends do. I won’t fail her.*

When mother and son left the house, Idana turned to Kyra, who was staring at one of the jars with furrowed brow.

“Frog’s guts? For goodness’ sake, do you want us all to throw up?”

Idana laughed. “No, silly, it’s for a medicine – although in your case, now I come to think of it, it might be a good idea to give your stomach a thorough cleanout.”

“In your dreams!”

“What the eye doesn’t see, the heart won’t grieve over …”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Oh yes, I would!”

They both laughed and hugged each other.

“So what brings you here today? Friendly visit, or an errand?”

“Neither. I’ve come because I’m finding it hard to rest… nightmares… and Ikai suggested I had a word with you, to see if you could give me something to help me sleep.”

Idana stroked Kyra’s arm gently. There was a look of worry on her face. “You’re not sleeping? Is it because of what we went through?”

Kyra nodded and lowered her eyes.

“I understand. I have nightmares too, sometimes really horrible ones. What happened there, all that terrible experience, is something we’ll always carry with us. That’s how the human soul works, or our minds, whichever you prefer. It’s hard to get over traumatic experiences, very hard to forget them… I’ll prepare a sachet with some herbs to help you sleep. Make yourself a tisane before going to bed. That’ll help.”

“Thanks, Freckles,” Kyra said with a grateful smile.

“What are friends for?” Idana answered. She was smiling too.

They said goodbye, and Kyra was on the point of leaving when Idana added: “And don’t get into any trouble.”

Kyra laughed heartily. “You know me, I couldn’t possibly.”

A little later, sitting on the sand spellbound, Kyra was watching the sea. It was a hot day, with a summer sun shining brightly in a clear sky which vied in beauty with the imposing ocean which awed her so much. *Mother Oxatsi’s greatness leaves me breathless.* A long wave broke on the shore, and a sea of spray caressed her bare feet. The touch of the sea water made her body relax still more. She was alone on a beach of fine white sand and crystalline blue water. Behind her a line of palm trees gave way to the forest and the path that led to the Shelter. She sighed. *This is beautiful. It’s hard to believe what my eyes are seeing.* She heaved a deep sigh, and the smell of brine flooded her lungs. White birds filled the sky with loud shrieks, momentarily covering the soft roar of the waves breaking on the beach.

Sitting there, enjoying a peace her soul had never before known, she felt happy. She had been a slave her whole life. She knew only the hard, never-ending labor of the fields, and the exhaustion, and the hopelessness which never leaves those who go hungry. For the first time in her life she could enjoy a few moments of true peace and happiness. *This is the life Ikai can see here, what he wants for us. That's why he won't risk letting himself be dragged into something that might endanger this place out of a dream, this peace.* A gust of the sea breeze touched her face and made her ruby mane of hair flutter around her face. She felt so well, so contented, she could stay there forever, enjoying that miracle of nature, peace and wellbeing which filled her soul.

She took a fistful of sand and let it slide between her fingers, enjoying the sensation. Watching the sand fall, she realized why this apparent haven of peace could never be that entirely. In the palm of her hand only a few grains of sand were left. *These are us, the few lucky ones who've managed to reach freedom in this Shelter. But the rest of the Senoca, more than a hundred thousand slaves who are still trying to survive an existence of pain and suffering: they aren't free, and they never will be if we escape and forget about them. I can't forget them, can't forget that they suffer every day, that the damn Gods and their servants exploit them, torture and kill them daily. I won't forget what they did to Yosane, what they did to the rest of the Selected. I'll die sooner than forget! That would be betrayal. No, I won't shut my eyes to my people's suffering, however happy I might be here in this paradise. I'll never forget them! Never!*

She sighed deeply and tried to recompose herself. Her temper had stirred, and once that happened it was hard for her to placate it. *I must speak to Ikai, make him see that we have to join the fight. I know he'll say we've already done it, that we welcome refugees, more than we really can, at the risk of the life of everybody in the Shelter. But it's not enough. For every refugee we save, a hundred die, and that'll never change, not unless we step in, bring down Sesmok and free the Senocas. If we don't fight, we'll always be a slave people. Always. Damn! We have to fight! This place is just a mirage.* But she knew that to her brother the Shelter was much more than that, and it was going to be very hard to convince him. *But I will! Even if I have to break that thick head of his with a rock and stuff the idea inside it myself.*

Footsteps behind her made her turn. She saw Romen coming out of the palm trees. He approached, trying to read her mood as he came.

“I’m sorry to interrupt one of our Heroes while she’s resting,” he said apologetically.

“No trouble, and do stop referring to us as Heroes. We’re just Senocas like you.”

“Thank you. I’ll try… Kyra… it’s just that for us, for the people, the seven are – I mean you’re – Heroes, and it’s very hard to forget that.”

“I can assure you there’s very little that’s heroic in me,” she said with a sour smile.

Romen smiled too, and she noticed that the young rebel had a very attractive smile. She had not noticed him particularly; they had barely crossed paths since the last group of refugees had arrived. He was thin, a couple of fingers taller than her. He moved nimbly and self-confidently. His brown hair was cut short, with a fringe to one side which fell over a pair of penetrating blue eyes. When the sunlight fell on his forehead she saw that his skin was darker than was usual among the pale Senocas, which made him attractive. He reminded her of Malte. The memory of her friend’s fatal end at the hands of the Enforcers filled her with longing, and she looked away toward the sea.

He too was looking at the infinite ocean before them. “It’s beautiful. It’s hard to believe something so beautiful can be real.”

“Yes. Whenever I can, I come here to think and enjoy this wonder.”

“Forgive me,” he said uncomfortably. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Never mind, I’d already done enough contemplating for today.” She smiled. “It’s not my specialty either. I’m more of a one for acting than thinking.”

Romen laughed. “To be honest, so am I, I have to say. I have a tendency to jump straight on to something before asking. Liriana always tells me to leave the plans to her, then she’ll let me know what I have to do to make it happen.”

“I can see we’re alike. That’s good. I hate know-it-alls. Have you known Liriana long?”

“Practically my whole adult life.” He raised his arm and showed Kyra the Ring with the symbol of the eagle.

“Ah, now I see. You belonged to the Guard, like her.”

Romen nodded. “I was in her squad. She was my Captain. She trained me and taught me everything I know…”

“In that case you must be a good fighter.”

“I’m pretty good with weapons, yes…”

“Forgive me, I interrupted you. I’m interested in weapons and combat, that’s why I asked. Go on.”

“That’s unusual in a peasant… but of course, you’re a Hero… I was saying that Liriana trained me. She’s a great woman, a born leader. I’ve had proof of that in all the years I’ve been under her command. When she deserted, I went with her. Me and a few others among the ones she trusted, who were faithful to the cause.”

“I guess Sesmok must have ordered an investigation of the City Guard after Liriana helped my brother escape.”

“That’s right. The whole regiment was *investigated* in depth. There was torture and blood spilled. Several officers were executed as a lesson, and to set an example.”

“Ugh! What a disgusting pig that Sesmok is!”

“He’s a treacherous viper, and very dangerous. They say in the capital that if there’s anyone the Regent doesn’t approve of, his days are numbered and he dies a painful death.”

“We should finish him off. Stab his heart with a poisoned dagger.”

“Gedrel’s tried… but he’s fanatical about security, and paranoid as well. We’ve never managed to get close enough to him. The worst thing is that now it’ll be even more difficult. He’ll already have heard rumors of the uprising, and he won’t take the slightest risk. He’ll double his personal guard and armor the capital, especially his palace.”

Kyra clenched her jaw. “If it was in my hands…”

“That’s the reason… why I came to talk to you.”

“Out with it. Don’t beat about the bush. Patience isn’t my thing.”

“Well… you see, your brother has made his position clear, and I respect it completely. The responsibility of leading the Shelter is a very heavy one. Many lives depend on his decisions.”

“But…”

“But Gedrel entrusted me with an important mission, and it’s my duty to try to carry it out by whatever means.”

“The plea for help you made to Ikai?”

“Exactly. Your brother doesn’t want to take any more risks. It’s a prudent attitude, and a worthy one, but there are some important people who are crucial for the cause… for Gedrel… They’re in danger.”

“And you want me to help.”

“The other Heroes won’t disobey Ikai. You’re the only one I can appeal to.”

“Ha! And you said you weren’t one of the smart ones. How do you know I’d disobey my brother?”

Romen shrugged and took on an innocent look. He gave her his charming smile.

“Yeah, yeah. Go easy on the smiles. What you’re asking of me is going to get me into serious trouble with my brother.”

“Will you think about it, at least? I can assure you you’ll be doing a great thing for the cause. We’re risking a lot, and if there was any other way I wouldn’t be asking you.”

“All right, I’ll think about it. But I can’t guarantee anything. The last thing I want to do is disobey my brother and make him angry.”

“Thank you, Kyra,” Romen said, and bowed.

“Stop curtsying, for Oxatsi’s sake!” she protested, laughing.

Romen smiled from ear to ear and moved away until he was lost in the dense foliage of the forest. She followed him with her gaze. She had been pleasantly surprised by the rebel soldier. Not only by his smile, but by his loyalty to the cause, even though what he had proposed put her in a difficult position. But she liked people with ideals, people who did not shrink in the face of difficulties, who looked for solutions instead of burying their heads in the sand when things did not go as planned. She would have to think very

carefully about following Romen against her brother's will. Very carefully indeed.

When she thought of Romen another image filled her mind, that of someone who had impressed her even more. She remembered Adamis's beautiful face, his grey-blue eyes, how he looked at her when he talked to her, and such a feeling of pleasure took hold of her that everything else around her disappeared for a moment. She recalled the slimness of his body, his golden skin and his immense Power. Every time she thought of Adamis something in her stomach awoke, like a small sleeping creature which started to scamper around, upsetting her but at the same time leaving her delighted. *But what on earth is wrong with me? I go all silly thinking about him. Am I going off my head? For the love of Oxatsi, he's a damned God, a spoilt arrogant Prince who waited till my captivity was almost over before he deigned to show me the slightest bit of kindness.* But deep inside her she knew Adamis was much more than that, and even though she wanted to believe otherwise, she could not. Without meaning to, she let herself be carried away by the memory of the Prince's company, of his last words before their farewell, and the feeling of wellbeing came over her once again.

She remembered the disc of Power which he had given her and which she always wore on her. The conversation with Albana came to her mind, and the wellbeing turned first to restlessness, then quickly to anger. She brought the disc out of the little leather pouch where she kept it hidden and stared at it. The golden pip fascinated her; she knew that Adamis's Power was in it. It was as though she were carrying a part of him with her. *Or rather a part of his life, one he'll never be able to enjoy because he gave it to me.* She studied the arcane disc, trying to make sense of it all. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized Albana might be right: that she must be a hybrid, because Notaplo had come to the same conclusion with his experiment. *But I can't be a bloody hybrid! It's impossible! My parents are both human, both Senoca!* She shook her head.

She tried to calm herself, without much success. There was only one way to know the truth: she would have to talk to her mother, although she was sure of the answer she would get. Solma was the best mother in the world, but there was no Power in her veins. Quite the opposite: she had

been sickly and weak half her life. *Why? To hell with it! Why did you have to give me this damn artifact?* She turned her anger against Adamis.

“It’s no good just moaning, you always have to find something you can do. So I’ll do something.”

She got up and went in search of her mother.

She found her in the kitchen of the house they shared, preparing a stew which smelt so rich it awoke the lion sleeping in her stomach.

“It smells too good,” she said cheerfully. “It’ll attract more refugees.”

“Kyra, dear, you’re just in time. Come and help me.”

“Sure, Mom. What would you like me to do?”

Solma brandished a wooden ladle. “Certainly not cook. You’re so impatient you hurry everything and never manage to make anything taste good.”

“I’ll admit cooking isn’t my thing, but I like helping you.”

“Well, you could always pay attention and learn from your old mother.”

“You’re not that old, and you know I’ll never learn.”

“Because you’re not interested. When something interests you, you learn quickly… don’t think I haven’t seen you training with your brother and Urda. Cooking? No way. But if it’s fighting… that’s different.”

“Mom…”

“Well, let’s leave it at that … now stir the broth, nice and slow.” She handed her daughter the ladle.

The conversation between mother and daughter drifted to the trivialities of life in the Shelter, the usual gossip about the newly arrived and their thousand and one needs: from food to medicines, tools and other basic essentials. They lacked everything, but they were free, and with freedom there came the happiness they had so much longed for. Poor, needy, but happy. Kyra went to get the cleaning cloth, but could not find it. She was about to ask Solma when she saw it soaking in a wooden bowl to one side, almost hidden. While her mother was telling her what an excellent hunter

Isaz was and how lucky they were to have him to get fresh meat for them, she picked up the cloth and saw it was stained with blood.

“Did you cut yourself, mom?”

Solma turned round. When she saw the cloth in her daughter’s hand her face shadowed.

“No… no, I didn’t… It’s blood from a piece of meat…”

Kyra was not convinced, either by the explanation or by her mother’s tone.

“Tell me the truth. You’d never wipe off blood with your cloth, that’s the sort of thing I’d do… and besides, where’s the meat?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. You soak it and rub it hard and then it comes out,”

“Blood’s very hard to clean off. You taught me that. Where’s this blood from? Are you sick again? Don’t hide it from me.”

“It’s nothing, Kyra, let it be…”

“Mom, tell me the truth!”

Solma sighed resignedly. “I coughed up some blood this morning, that’s all.”

“That’s all? You told me you weren’t coughing up blood any more, that the climate of this island was doing you good, that your lungs seemed to have improved, that you were feeling much better.”

“I was… at first… I thought I was getting better… but it seems to have come back.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. What good would it do? None.”

“Mom, you should’ve told us.”

“I’ve had this illness all my life. It still hasn’t beaten me, and I’m not giving up.”

“Has Idana seen you?”

“The good apothecary can’t do anything for me.”

“I’ll bring her for dinner this evening and have her examine you. She’ll tell us what she can do for you. I’m sure she can prepare something to help your cough, at least.”

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart.”

“I’ll bring her, whether you like it or not.”

Solma gave up in the face of her daughter’s insistence and nodded with a sweet smile. Kyra hugged her, saying nothing, but holding her for a long moment. Then they went on preparing lunch.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about, Mom,” Kyra said.

“What is it?”

Kyra showed her Adamis’s disc.

“Had you ever seen anything like this before?”

“No… never. It’s pretty, but it doesn’t look like a jewel. It doesn’t even look like Senoca work. Is it… something to do with the Enforcers?”

“No, the Gods.”

“The Gods? What are you doing with something of theirs?”

“Adamis gave it to me. There’s a tiny bit of his Power in it.”

“Why did he give it to you, this God who held you prisoner?”

“I’m not sure. I think he wanted me to use it. In fact I’m practically convinced that’s why he gave it to me.”

“Well, that’s very strange. Why would a God do such a thing? Won’t it be dangerous? Nothing good comes from the Gods, only death and destruction.”

“Don’t worry. To use it you need to be a Hybrid.”

Solma’s face showed only surprise and incomprehension. “A what?” she asked.

“A Hybrid,” Kyra repeated more slowly. “Don’t you know what that is?” She was trying to read her mother’s face, alert to every gesture and movement.

“Hybrid? No, I don’t know what it means. Why are you asking such strange questions?”

“To use it you must have Gods’ blood and must have inherited their ability to generate and use the Power.”

“What strange talk is this? And why should he have given it to you, this God?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out, Mom. Am I a Hybrid?”

“Kyra! What sort of nonsense is this? You’re my daughter, a Senoca. You’re not anything strange.”

“Are you sure, Mother? The Gods tested me, and they say I’m a Hybrid. So is Albana. Adamis has given me this disc, and I’ve found I can use it. Are you telling me the truth, Mother?”

“For Oxatsi’s sake! You’re the daughter of Solma and Siul, two Senoca, children of Senoca. You’re not any kind of Hybrid, or whatever it is they told you that you are.”

“Doesn’t any blood of the Gods run through your veins, Mom?”

“I’m a Senoca farmer from the Sixth County, just like my parents, and my parents’ parents,” she said in a tone which left no place for doubt. “There’s only Senoca blood in our veins. That I can swear to you.”

Kyra was bewildered by the answer. She had hoped her mother would be able to clear up the mystery which haunted her. But the conviction in Solma’s voice left no doubt that she was telling her the truth.

“And Father?”

“Siul grew up two farms south of my parents’, along the road to Issoli. Your father was a farmer just like his parents and grandparents. He never left the fields, he never left the Sixth County. We were all country folk. We’ve always been, both our families, right back to the beginning.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am, believe me.”

Those answers left Kyra in a state of total confusion. *What’s the explanation of this? It doesn’t make sense.*

“Stop going over it, my child. Don’t believe anything the Gods may have tried to put into your head. Nothing good will come of that. Everything the Gods touch rots. Where they tread, nothing springs up again. Forget the whole business. It’ll bring you nothing but pain. Take heed of your old mother.”

“Old? There’s hardly a wrinkle on your face.”

“Oh, how I wish! Thank goodness we don’t have a mirror.”

Mother and daughter laughed at the thought.

“Let’s finish this and clean up,” Solma said with an affectionate smile.

Kyra nodded, returning the smile. At that moment Solma put her hand to her chest. Her kind expression changed to one of pain.

“What’s the matter, Mom? Don’t you feel well?”

Solma tried to reply, but instead of words, what came out of her throat was a racking, uncontrollable cough. Kyra noticed something wet on her face. She put her hand to her own forehead and wiped it off. She looked at her hand with horror, It was her mother’s blood!”

“Mom!”

But her mother could not answer. She was coughing, such a deep, hacking cough that she seemed to be bringing up her whole lungs. She spat saliva and blood with every cough. Kyra hugged her and gave her a cloth to hold back the cough. And as she did so, Solma collapsed to the ground. She began to convulse uncontrollably before the girl’s horrified eyes.

“Mom, what’s happening?” she cried, horribly afraid.

Solma was shaking, banging her limbs on the ground as if she had been struck by lightning in a storm.

“Mom, don’t die! Nooooo!”

But Solma was unresponsive. Kyra held her mother’s head as she went on convulsing on the floor, blood pouring out of her mouth, nose and ears.

Kyra shouted to the heavens: “Somebody help me! For Oxatsi’s sake, call Idana!”

The convulsions became stronger.

“Hold on! Don’t die on me! Hold on!”

Chapter 8

Ikai held Solma's hand in his own. He was sitting beside the bed where his mother lay, his head down. Someone came into the room, but he was so tired and saddened he did not even raise his head. He could not remember how long he had been there; all he felt was impotence the size of a mountain crushing him.

"You should rest," he heard Albana say.

He shook his head.

"There's nothing you can do…"

"All the same, I'll stay with her."

Kyra's muffled sobs reached him from the other side of the half-open door. His sister was sitting on the floor with her arms around her knees, trying hard not to cry, to stay brave, without much success. Urda was with her, staring at the floor with dull eyes. The atmosphere in the house was so gloomy it was like a wake.

Idana came into the room, carrying a small bowl, and Ikai stood up at once.

"Will she live?" His words were a plea.

The apothecary held Solma's head gently and forced the infusion down the half-conscious patient's throat.

"She's very weak. Barely breathing."

"She must live. She can't leave us now, after all we've been through."

"I'm doing everything I can, but she's very sick…"

"We need her," Ikai begged, almost unable to articulate the words for the knot in his throat.

"We'll know at dawn," Idana said. Her face was heavy. "Be strong…"

The night went by like a slow, unending torture. Nobody slept, and time seemed to stand still. They were all silent, afraid of breaking the somber

quiet which hung over the house and hastening that dearly-beloved woman's final journey.

When dawn came and the first light crept in through the windows, they all questioned Idana in fear and hope. But Solma had not opened her eyes, she was not moving, and her breathing was almost imperceptible. Idana examined her again, as she had through the night at regular intervals. Without a word she left the room, to return a few minutes later with a green potion in a glass jar. She administered it to Solma, then massaged her chest and back with a brown ointment which smelled nauseating.

Fearfully, Ikai watched Idana's every movement. Kyra knelt beside him, stroking Solma's forehead. When the apothecary finished she turned to both of them.

"I've done all I could –"

"Is she going to live?" Kyra interrupted.

"– but I can't heal her."

"You mean she's going to die?" Ikai asked. He was dreading the answer.

"I very much fear so… I'm deeply sorry…"

"What's wrong with her? She's been sick for a long time, but never this badly."

"At first I wasn't sure. I thought it was some sickness of the lungs – hay fever, perhaps – but no, this is something different, unfortunately much more serious. She's suffering from a strange illness, something that's killing her from the inside, from her blood. I've never seen anything like it, it's as if her own blood was turning against her and attacking her organs. It's invading her lungs, and that makes her cough blood. Unfortunately it's beyond my knowledge… I'm afraid I can't cure her."

"There must be something we can do!" Kyra cried. There were tears in her eyes.

"She's unconscious and I very much fear she won't come out of her dream-state. I can keep her alive for a while, but that's all I can do."

"How long?" Ikai asked .

"It's impossible to know. It depends on how strong her body is, and how far the illness has progressed. In this trance-like state the blood-poisoning

should progress much more slowly, but how slowly I don’t know. A few weeks at the most…”

“I won’t accept it! I’m not going to let her die!” Kyra cried in despair.

Idana went over to the window and watched the dawn brightening with a thoughtful look. “I remember my father telling me about a healer once, someone truly exceptional… one my grandfather had gone to in despair, when everything was lost.”

Ikai was now full of interest. “A healer? Who?”

“Not exactly a healer… they called her The Witch of the Lake, if I remember my father’s story aright. She was a sinister character. There were evil rumors about her. They said she made sacrifices… of animals… some even said she sacrificed humans… there was talk of babies…”

“She sacrificed babies? That’s abominable! How could a monster like that help us?”

“Ikai, let her finish,” Kyra said.

Frowning, Ikai crossed his arms over his shoulders.

“According to my father,” Idana went on, “the Witch lives in an isolated corner of the Fourth County. She’s said to have powers, and that she’s capable of either ending somebody’s life or healing diseases of the blood. Nobody of the Fourth County dares to visit the lake where she lives, so rumor has it: it’s between the three peaks of the Dark Mountains. My grandfather Gusten, who’s also an apothecary like his father and his grandfather before him, had heard of this Witch, and once when things were desperate he asked for her help.”

“What happened?” Kyra asked.

“Gusten was called to try and save a patient with a rare hereditary illness. Several members of the family had died from the same thing. Otes, the sick man, was the patriarch of the Lomas family, who were very powerful and influential, distant relatives of the Regent. The best surgeons had already given up all hope and left. My grandfather tried to save him. He did everything he could, but without success. It was then that Nemora, the patriarch’s wife, gave Gusten a desperate ultimatum: either he must save Otes or he and all his family would be hanged for incompetence.”

“The pigs!” Kyra burst out. “Why should a poor apothecary be expected to cure what the best surgeons couldn’t? If it was up to me I’d send all those

noble families to the salt mines, then they'd learn. I really would!"

Ikai put his hand on his sister's shoulder to sooth her.

"Go on," he said to Idana. He was deeply interested now.

"My father told me that Gusten, in desperation, consulted the Guild of Apothecaries in search of some solution. It was someone from the Guild, an old apothecary of the Fourth County, who told him about the Witch. As he had no other option, he went in search of her."

"Did he find her?" Kyra asked.

"He reached the hidden lake, in a valley where the sun never shines, in the eternal shadow of the three great peaks. He camped there for four days beside the lake, but saw no trace of the Witch no matter how hard he searched. On the fifth day, just as he was getting ready to leave, the Witch came."

"What happened?"

"My grandfather never revealed the details of their meeting to my father or anybody else. What the Witch asked for in return for her help, he took with him to the grave. But my father did confirm one thing. Gusten healed Otes and saved his family from the hangman with a strange preparation the Witch gave him. A remedy that didn't come from the Senoca."

Kyra was excited by the possibility. "Then she saved him? Could she save Mother?"

"Yes, she saved him. It's risky letting yourself be guided by a story like that… more fiction than reality… but we could try."

"Risky?" Ikai said. He shook his head. "It's a lot more than that. It's irrational, if not downright crazy."

Kyra ignored her brother's comment. "Do you believe the story?" she asked Idana.

Idana thought about this for some time, then nodded. "Yes, I believe what my father told me is true. He had no reason to lie to me, even more so considering it's such a weird family story."

"It sounds to me as though it's no more than myth and folklore," Ikai said. He sounded unconvinced. "A story told around the fire to scare the children at dinnertime and entertain the adults."

Albana had said nothing until then. Now she did: “As a general rule, there’s always a glimpse of truth behind myth and folklore. And sometimes a lot. We shouldn’t dismiss the story too easily. There might be some truth in it.”

Ikai shook his head again. “I’d need more than that to make me believe in something so illogical.”

Urda rarely expressed her opinion, but this time she did: “I’m with Ikai on this. There are many strange stories among our Senoca beliefs. They don’t have to be true. This one seems quite incredible.”

“Is there anybody in the Shelter from the Fourth County who could corroborate the story?” Albana asked.

“Isaz comes from the Fourth County!” Kyra said. “He’s always telling me about it.

“I’ll go and fetch him,” Albana said, and slipped away.

When Isaz came in, with Albana following him, he greeted them all politely and shook his head when he saw Solma’s state.

He listened attentively as Idana told him her grandfather’s story. When she had finished, he stroked his chin and considered what he had heard.

“This business about the Witch of the Lake is bad, very bad,” he said at last. “We shouldn’t go bothering her.”

“So you’ve heard of her?” Ikai asked.

“We know of her in the Fourth County… and we know that disturbing her ends in death, nine times out of ten. It’s a bad thing even to talk about her. The Hunters can never locate her. They’ve tried unsuccessfully, time and again. When they get to the lake they lose her trail completely, just as if it had vanished into thin air.” He looked around him with his shoulders hunched, as if worried that the Witch might hear him.

Ikai found the trapper’s strange behavior puzzling. “I didn’t take you for a superstitious man, Isaz. You’re intelligent and experienced. How come this *witch* from your own land scares you?”

“The Witch of the Lake is an evil being, a creature with Dark Power. She sacrifices beasts and humans to drink their blood. She takes babies away in the night, sacrifices them and drinks their blood so she can live

forever. She's been by that lake close to a thousand years. Some say even more, that she was already there when we were enslaved."

"But that's impossible," Ikai said. "She'd be dead by now."

"Not if she rejuvenates herself through her sacrifices," Isaz said. He made a protective sign to Father Girlai.

"But have you heard that she's ever cured people?" Kyra asked.

Isaz nodded. "Those who seek her out do so for different reasons: some for gold, others for glory, still others for miraculous cures. With those she doesn't kill and eat, she names a price for their requests. A very high price, which many can't or don't wish to pay, but once it's fixed she won't let them refuse. And yes, I know she's cured people of illnesses and deformities which the surgeons and apothecaries were unable to."

Ikai was infected by Isaz's unease. "I don't like this at all," he said,

Kyra looked at her mother's pale face, then turned to the group. "Idana thinks there's a chance, and Isaz has confirmed it. I'm going to see this Witch. I don't care about the risk or the price she asks in return. I'm determined!"

"You're not going anywhere," Ikai said curtly.

"But we have to go. Mom's dying, we're losing her!"

"Don't be hasty. Let me think…" Ikai said. He needed a break before he could make the right decision.

Kyra clenched her fists. "There's nothing to think about. I'm going!"

"Kyra, for the love of Oxatsi!" he scolded her. "Does anybody have any other idea?"

Albana stepped forward. "I do."

"Go ahead, we're listening," said Ikai, and glared at his sister.

"It's as farfetched and risky as the one we already have, if not more so. But it is a chance..."

"What? Go on, then. Explain."

"All right then, here you are. We could kidnap Miratos, Sesmok's Personal Surgeon, and bring him here to take care of Solma. There's no better or more experienced surgeon within the entire Boundary."

There was silence as they all considered the suggestion. Surprisingly, Urda was the first to speak.

“It’s a really dangerous idea,” she said, frowning. “Miratos is the second most well-protected man, after Sesmok himself. An Elite Guard stays with him day and night. Nobody can get near him, because he’s the only man the Regent trusts.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Kyra snapped without even pausing to think. “I don’t care how well protected he is, we’ll kidnap him and that’s that. And we’ll get rid of anyone who gets in our way.”

“What, a whole Elite Guard Regiment?” Ikai said. He shook his head. “I understand it’s an alternative, Albana, but as you said yourself, a very dangerous one. Besides, we’d have to go to the Capital, into the wolf’s den. We’re wanted there. There’s a price on our heads. To kidnap Sesmok’s Surgeon, in his home territory, under his very nose, seems near-suicidal to me.”

“I’d already said it was farfetched,” Albana said. “A thousand things might go wrong… the incursion, the actual kidnap, getting away…”

Ikai turned to Idana and put his hands on her shoulders. He gazed into her eyes and said: “I trust your judgment, Idana. We have two alternatives. And frankly they’re both pretty unviable and hard to carry out. Which would you recommend?”

Idana sighed and pondered her answer.

“Miratos is the best and wisest Senoca Surgeon. A man of proven worth. I’d say that’s the most rational choice. But faced with this unusual illness of Solma’s, I honestly believe it’s out of reach of a Surgeon’s knowledge, even if he is the best. My instinct tells me we need the Witch. I may be wrong, though.”

“Thank you, Idana,” Ikai said. “My head tells me Miratos is the most sensible option, but for once – and I hope I don’t live to regret it – I’m going to listen to what my instinct tells me, which is the same as your own, Idana. We’ll go with the option of the Witch of the Lake.”

“I hope I’m not making a mistake,” Idana said with a grimace.

“I hope none of us are.”

“All right, then,” Kyra said. “We’ll set out for the Fourth County at dawn,”

Ikai turned to his sister. “No, Kyra, you’re not coming. I need you here.”

“Of course I’m coming! She’s my mother, and nothing’s going to stop me!”

“If we both go and both of us die, what’ll happen to Mother? What’ll happen to the Shelter and these people? Have you thought of that?”

“But… I need to do something! I can’t just stay here doing nothing, watching Mom slowly die!”

“You stay here and protect her till I come back. Both her and the Shelter.”

“Why can’t I go and you stay?”

“Think with your head and not your heart, sister. Which of the two is best prepared for an expedition to some faraway mountains, to face dangers, to kill if necessary?”

Kyra had a sharp retort ready, but she bit her tongue.

“Take care of Mother and the Shelter until I come back. That’s your mission. I know you don’t like it, but I need you to do it.”

She waved her arms furiously. “Oh, to hell with it!”

“Thank you, sister. I’m counting on you.”

“I’ll help her,” Urda said. “You can be easy in your minds.”

Ikai was grateful for this. He thanked her with a smile.

“Isaz, will you guide us to this lake in the mountains?”

The hunter shook himself as if he were shivering, then let his shoulders sag. “I’ll guide you there, but I think it’s a terrible idea. Most likely we won’t come back.”

“That won’t stop me.”

“I’ll come with you. To make sure you live a little longer,” Albana said with a roguish grin.

“Thanks,” said Ikai, and grinned in his turn.

He gave a final look at his mother in her bed, then turned to his sister and friends, one by one, and said:

“It’s decided, then. We leave at dawn.”

Chapter 9

It was mid-morning when Karm and Honus saw the little village from the ash forest where they were hiding.

“What do you think? Shall we risk it?” Karm asked. As he spoke, he was looking out for any sign of danger.

Honus hunched his substantial body to hide himself behind some bushes. “Be damned if I know!”

“It looks like a quiet village. I can’t see any sign of either the Guard or the Enforcers.”

“Huh. That doesn’t mean the villagers won’t turn us in the moment they set eyes on us. We’re a couple of bloody Pariahs now, and we’ll stand out from a league away.”

Karm looked at his grumpy friend. Honus was right; their appearance was pitiful. They were in rags, badly in need of a bath, and they had not eaten decently in the three weeks since their escape from the mine. All this time they had been in hiding, keeping away from roads and villages, lurking in the woods and scrub.

“And what if the damn Hunters are after us? If we leave the cover of the forests the pigs will hunt us down.”

Karm shook his head. “I doubt they’ll have sent Hunters after us. They’ll think we died in the fire. I don’t believe they even know we managed to escape. There was too much confusion.”

“With my bad luck, you can bet they know!”

“If they did, the Hunters would already have caught us. You and I aren’t exactly experts when it comes to hiding our trail…”

“How am I supposed to know how to hide my trail if I’ve spent most of my life digging underground?”

Karm laughed. “I don’t mean we should know how, just that all we know is how to dig tunnels, which means they’d have caught us by now.”

“Maybe you’re right… I tell you something, I’m starving. My stomach is growling and I’d give anything for a piece of meat. And I’m well aware we don’t know how to hunt, so spare me!”

“We’ve managed to survive till now, and that’s what counts, my friend.”

“Yes, on berries, roots and a few fish from the river. I need something solid, or else I’ll faint!”

“Then we’ll have to take the risk. There’s not much choice.”

“All right,” Honus grumbled. “Let’s do it. But you do the talking. You know that’s not my thing.”

A smile crept over Karm’s face. It was true enough. He would have to be careful. To be captured after managing to escape from that underground hell would be devastating. Although dying of hunger would be even worse.

They left the forest and approached the village, slowly, keeping a wary eye on everything around them. It was small, a community of farmers, with fields spreading around a dozen plain wooden houses. A little to the east were half a dozen more houses, with a clear brook running between both communities. The size of the village was not big enough to hold a garrison, which eased Karm’s stomach. It seemed to have taken on a life of its own, what with hunger and nerves.

They came to a square where several small children were playing happily: they still wore no Rings.

Enjoy your freedom as long as you can, little ones. You’ll lose it soon enough, and you’ll never get it back.

“Who’s there?” an old voice challenged them.

Karm and Honus turned to find a white-haired peasant with a wrinkled face. He looked about sixty, but seemed to have lived more than a hundred. Such was life and the struggle for survival. Three women ran out from the houses, fear in their eyes for the lives of their children, whom they gathered and carried away in a hurry. The square was soon deserted.

“Good morning,” Karm said. He raised his hands to show that they were unarmed. “We mean you no harm.”

“What do you want, then?” the old man asked. There was distrust in his black eyes.

“Something to eat. It’s been days since we had a bite.”

“We’re all hungry. That’s the sign of the Senoca.”

“Because of the bloody Gods!” Honus barked.

At this the old man stepped back in fear.

“Forgive my friend,” Karm hastened to say. He glared reproachfully at Honus. “That’s hunger speaking. He doesn’t really know what he’s saying.”

The old man looked doubtfully at the two fugitive miners for a moment. Several other figures began to appear in doorways, watching them.

“That’s blasphemy, and the punishment for that is death. It’s against the Law of the Gods. If the Enforcers heard, we’d all be punished.”

“It won’t happen again, I promise,” Karm said. He raised a finger to his friend in warning.

“They’re Pariahs,” a woman said in an unsteady voice from one of the houses. “We can’t trust them. They could kill and rob us,”

She was middle-aged, and the fear on her face mirrored that of all the others.

“We’re only asking for a little food and water, then we’ll go on our way,” Karm pleaded. “You’ve nothing to fear from us,”

Several men arrived in the square, armed with hoes and rakes. “We can’t risk helping them,” said the one in the lead. “The Enforcers…”

There was silence. The fugitives watched the farmers. They could understand their fear of Pariahs, and most of all of Enforcers. Nobody moved for a long moment, and the touch of the wind on the roofs was all that could be heard.

At last the old man spoke. “Come to my house. I’ll take you in.”

“Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts,” Karm said in surprise. He and Honus hurried after the man.

The old man offered them what little food he had: a spiced soup, smoked meat and fish, cheese and nuts. The two friends ate as if this were the best feast they had ever enjoyed.

The old man introduced himself as he brought a jug of water. “My name is Adas.”

“I’m Karm, and this big guy is Honus.”

“We were starving to death,” Honus said as he bit off a strip of meat.

The old man smiled. “You certainly look a mess. I have some clothes that belonged to my son. I’ll go and fetch them. Behind there is a basin of water. You’d better clean yourselves up a bit. I don’t fancy ending my days with the stink you two are spreading around you.”

When he came back with the clothes Karm asked him: “Why are you helping us?”

Adas scratched his temple. “I wanted to remember what it felt like to do something that defied fear. I wanted to remember what it felt like to do the right thing. We’ve been at the mercy of terror for so long, we’ve forgotten even the most basic humanity. But this old Senoca does remember. Helping those in need is something that should always be done, not letting oneself be intimidated. You’re Senoca, just like me. You need help, and I can give it to you. I won’t let fear get the better of me. I won’t allow terror to defeat human decency once again.”

“You’re a good man, a decent one,” said Honus. “There aren’t many like you left.”

“There are some, but they’re so fearful they’ve forgotten who they once were.”

“Perhaps one day they’ll remember,” Karm said.

The old man’s lips twisted into a half–smile. “I hope you’re right.”

The two friends washed after taking the edge off their hunger, then put on the clothes Adas had brought out for them. They felt blissful.

“Won’t your son need these?” Karm asked.

Adas shook his head. “The Enforcers took him years ago.” He pointed to the Rings the miners wore. “I don’t know where, but I think it was to the mines. He was strong and tall. I’ve never seen him again and probably never will. My time is up. But I like to think that if he should escape, some tired old man from a little village would help him survive.”

Karm understood and nodded. “Honus and I will be forever grateful to you.”

“Go to the back. You’ll find two beds. Rest for the night. You’ll be able to go on your way tomorrow. I’ll beg some victuals from the neighbors and leave them in that satchel.” He indicated an old traveling bag on the table.

“You’re a great man,” Honus said. “Your son must be very proud of you.” He stepped forward to hug the old man.

There’s still hope for the Senoca, Karm thought. His eyes were moist.

The two friends slept as they had not for a long time. Karm even managed to dream: a pleasant dream, very different from the usual nightmares of darkness and pain which used to torment him in the mines.

“I feel as if I’d slept for a hundred years!” cried Honus as he stretched his eye-catching muscles.

Karm got to his feet and enjoyed the warmth of the morning which filtered through the window.

Adas appeared at the door of the room carrying two bowls. “Goat’s milk,” he said with a smile. “You’re in luck.”

“The luck was finding you,” Karm replied, and both friends drank the milk, which tasted to them like the finest of elixirs.

“And to go with that…” Adas went on. He tossed them two slices of black bread.

“I’ll put up a monument to you!” Honus said as he gulped down the bread.

“The square out there is a big one,” said Adas. “There’s plenty of room!” All three of them laughed.

They were finishing their breakfast when they heard a muffled sound accompanied by a slight tremor, like a rhythmic, hollow hammering. The birds in the nearby trees flew away. The three remained listening, trying to puzzle out what the strange noise might be.

Adas’ eyes narrowed. “Enforcers!”

“Enforcers?” Karm asked in surprise. “Here? Are you sure?”

Adas put his head out of the door and looked in the direction of the path that led into the village. The sound meanwhile was growing louder.

Honus recognized it. “Hell! Horses’ hooves!”

The old man glanced at them. “They’re Enforcers, in carts, coming up the path. You’d better hide, quickly!”

“Where?” Karm asked. Looking around him, he saw that the house was so bare there was nowhere to hide.

“I don’t know, but hide or else you’re dead men, and me with you. Quick!”

Adas went out. With tired steps, his shoulders hunched, he walked to the center of the square.

The Enforcers soon entered the village. They came in four carts pulled by powerful horses. The first one was a golden cart, drawn by two jet-black coursers and guided by an Eye-of-the-Gods. It was followed by three heavy silver carts drawn by four horses each, carrying a dozen Executors. At the center of the square they stopped and got off without a word. The farmers, men, women and children, came out of their houses at once and threw themselves on the ground, remaining on their knees with their foreheads touching the ground and their arms outstretched.

The Eye stood in the center of the square, the dozen Executors behind him. From his tunic he brought out something long and metallic. He placed it on his helmet at the level of his mouth. The helmet opened slightly, and the Eye let out a long hissing shriek. When the sound touched the object, the hiss became an ear-splitting scream. Everyone put their hands to their ears, seeking to avoid the insufferable noise. The Eye kept up the call for a long moment, letting the sound spread throughout the fields and forests nearby. Everybody for leagues around would hear the summons. If they failed to come to the village at once, the Executors would set out with the order to find and kill.

Karm watched, trying to bear the suffering, but his head felt as though it was about to burst. Honus, on his knees beside him, writhed with his hands over his ears. “My ears! Freaking bastards!”

The Eye brought out his silver book. When he had checked it he gestured to the Executors, who began to search the houses.

“Quiet, the Executors are coming. We must hide.”

Honus’ face was twisted in pain. “But where the hell are we going to hide?”

“I don’t know, but here they come!

A moment later an Executor entered Adas' house. The heavy steps of the Enforcer echoed on the fragile wooden floor. The sinister helmet scanned all the rooms in search of slaves, and his ominous spear checked every nook and cranny.

The Eye finished its summons. Free from the torture, the people in the square breathed out in relief, but none of them dared raise their eyes. The Executors went on searching until they were sure nobody was hiding in the houses, then went back to the Eye.

"Now what?" Honus whispered in Karm's ear.

"Now we wait and commend ourselves to Oxatsi."

"I hate heights."

"Stop complaining."

The two miners had climbed to the roof of the house and were lying on the old thatch, watching what was happening. Honus carefully removed one of the stones which held down the thatch so that he could stretch out his feet. Then he growled something about heights and his own bad luck.

For more than three hours nothing happened. The Eye-of-the-Gods waited impassively until all the farmers had returned from the fields and knelt before him. He finally counted them again and made a note in his silver book.

"Who is the leader of this village?" he asked in his shrill voice.

There was a silence. After a moment Adas spoke. "I'm the oldest, and speak for all."

"Come closer."

Adas got to his feet without looking directly at the Enforcer and went up to him.

"On your knees."

The good man knelt and bowed his head.

"The recount is correct. No births?"

Adas shook his head.

"Right. If you are lying to me and hiding any newborn, what is the punishment?"

The old man swallowed. "Death to all the elders of the village."

“I see you know the Law of the Gods.”

“We all know it.”

“I have a question for you, old man, and you had better answer with the truth. What do you know of those whom the slaves call the Heroes?”

Adas’ expression changed from fear to disbelief. “Heroes?”

“I shall not repeat it.”

“I… I don’t know anything about any heroes…”

“You lie. What is the punishment for lying?”

“D…death…”

“Exactly.”

Suddenly an Executor stepped forward and prepared to run his spear through Adas.

The Eye raised his arm, and the Executor stopped with his spear ready.

“He is an old man, he will not care much about dying,” the Eye said. “Better her.” He pointed to a little girl with copper-red hair, no more than seven years old.

The Executor grabbed her hair and dragged her across the ground to Adas’ feet, screaming and weeping with terror. Her mother’s plea was quickly silenced by another Executor who felled her with a brutal blow, leaving her unconscious. Several men made to rise, but the Executors stood in their midst, waiting for the slightest excuse to strike them.

The Eye pointed to the little girl. “The Heroes or her life,” he said in a bloodcurdling shriek.

Adas tried to sooth her. “Easy, little one, don’t cry. Old Adas will take care of you. Your name’s Alasa, isn’t it?” The child nodded, wiping away her tears with the worn-out sleeve of her old tunic.

“Time is up, old man.”

“All right, I’ll tell you the rumors that have reached us, but I don’t know whether they’re true or not. It’s just what we’ve heard.”

“Speak, and for her sake, it had better be something valuable.”

“They say that the Heroes of the Senoca are seven in number. They say they managed to escape from the Eternal City, they say they can cross the Boundary and take the Senoca with them. They say they’ve created a haven

for the Senoca beside Oxatsi, Mother Sea, that a rebellion led by the Heroes is brewing. They say there's hope for the Senoca, that the people want to follow the Heroes in the rebellion. That's the message that flies from village to village on the wind, the message that reaches the ears of the people."

Adas' words represented such an act of treason that a silence of absolute terror fell on the square. Fear was in the hearts of all but one, the one whose heart yearned for nothing more than that message.

There's hope for the Senoca, and now I know for sure, Karm thought as he watched the scene from the roof. *It's time to rise and fight, to follow the Heroes in the revolution.* He turned his head and found Honus shaking his head at the message which meant so much to Karm.

"You've heard it just like me, Honus," he whispered. "Don't deny it.

"That doesn't mean anything. It's just rumors."

"Say what you please, but I'm going to join the Heroes. I'm going to fight for the rebellion."

"To hell with it! You'll just get yourself killed, and me with you. Why are you so desperate to join this rebellion? Is it because of what happened to you before you were sent to the mines?"

Karm swallowed. "Maybe. Misfortunes change a man."

"You've never told me, but I know something really horrible must have happened to you. You cry out in your sleep, you cry out her name…"

"My past is mine, like my pain. But the pain of our people is everybody's pain. It affects us all."

"If you've never told me, then you must have your good reasons for it. Just as I have my own for not wanting to end up dead. By my guts, they're not going to get me now, not after so much time and suffering, not now that I'm free! You might not have anything to live for, you might want to fight to forget whatever happened to you, but I do have something, and I'm damned if I'm going to let myself be killed!"

The shriek of the Eye's voice made Karm and Honus crouch deeper, pressing their bodies against the roof.

"Everything they say goes against the Law of the Gods and is punished with death," the Eye said. His finger swept the square from one end to the

other. “What else do you know of the Heroes? Who are they? Where are they?”

“Don’t answer, Adas! Don’t tell them anything else!” came the shout of a young farmer.

The Eye-of-the-Gods gestured. One of the Executors readied his arm, and in the blink of an eye the spear pierced the farmer’s chest. The lifeless body struck two other men before it fell to the ground.

The Eye pointed at Alasa, who was stammering in terror. “She is next,”

Adas closed his eyes and heaved a sigh. Then he spoke with deep feeling in his voice: “Of the seven Heroes… it is known that two are brother and sister, seventeen or eighteen years old, from the village of Issoli.”

“Their names.”

Adas shrugged. “Their names are not known. She is a farmer who was Chosen by the Gods. He is a Hunter who went to rescue her from the Eternal City and despite everything, managed to do so. That’s what they say. I don’t know whether it’s true or not, but it’s what the rumors say.”

The Eye made a note in his silver book.

Karm dug Honus in the side.

“That’s where we have to go. To that village, to find those two Heroes.”

“Not bloody likely!”

“I’m going. It’s the path I have to follow. Fate’s given me the opportunity I was looking for, and I’m not going to waste it. I’m going to join the Heroes. If you don’t want to come, I understand, and I respect it.”

“Of course I don’t. I’m not going in search of some hero I know nothing about. Least of all with all the Enforcers looking for them now they know who they are and where they’re from.”

“All right, my friend. I’ll go alone.”

“Are you out of your mind? You’re crazy if you think you won’t end up skewered by a spear.”

The Eye turned to Adas.

“What else do you know?”

The old man looked up at the sky, trying to think of something else to say. Before he could reply, the Eye pointed to a woman on his right. Almost in the same moment the Executor drove his spear through her heart.

“No! Tara!” Adas cried out in agony. But the woman, still staring wide-eyed, was already dead.

Karm was speechless with disbelief and impotence. *He’s killed her just like that, like a sacrificial animal!* He looked blankly at Honus. Wrath erupted inside him like a volcano.

“Murderers!” he cried, more loudly than was wise. Honus covered his mouth with his hand to silence him. He wriggled, but Honus held his face tightly and held him back.

“My patience is running out, old man,” said the Eye menacingly.

“They say… they say that one of the Heroes… can let the Senoca cross the Boundary…”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I’ve told you everything that’s reached us. I swear. We have no more information. Please, I beg you, no more deaths.”

“Who is the leader of the rebellion?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. We don’t know anything else.”

The Eye stared at him. Suddenly the front of the Enforcer’s helmet divided into its two triangular halves, which moved to either side. The ominous Eye was revealed. A beam of intense light bathed Adas. The radiation was maintained for a long moment, as if the Eye were trying to read his mind, or perhaps find out the truth hidden in his soul. In the end the beam of light vanished and the Eye was again hidden inside the helmet.

“You are telling the truth.”

Adas sighed in relief.

“Whoever repeats the words of treason will be punished with death,” the Eye announced to the terrified onlookers.

“Let her live, please,” Adas begged with moist eyes as he gazed at Alasa. “She’s just a child.”

“She will live. She has not committed treason.”

“Thank you, thank you,” the old man said.

“But you will not live, since you are guilty.”

A spear he did not even see drove through Adas’ fragile body from behind. The old man arched, then with a cry of pain he fell to one side.

Nooooo! Bastards! Noooo! Driven by uncontrollable rage, Karm tried to stand up. He was on the point of leaping down into the middle of the square and tearing the pig to pieces. Honus hit him on the back of his neck with a stone. As he fell on to the roof and lost consciousness, Karm heard the Eye’s final order.

“Kill all the elders, both men and women. Then burn one third of the houses. Let all the villages of the region know what happens when the Law of the Gods is broken.”

And blood and fire fell on the Senoca once again.

Chapter 10

Sesmok woke with a terrible anxiety in his chest. He felt a rush of heat and his heart accelerated until it was beating like a drum in his chest and ears.

These cursed nightmares! Damned Golden Gods! He could not remember exactly what he had been dreaming about, but he had a vague memory of the figure of a God lurking behind him, ready to pierce him with a fiery arrow. He opened his eyes and saw the morning light filtering in through the exquisite curtains. He blew his nose and inhaled deeply in an attempt to rid himself of the oppression he felt.

He sat up, and a moan reached his ears. He turned to look at the two naked slave girls who were sleeping among the silk sheets. His eyes lingered on the beautiful young bodies, and he could not help a smile of enormous satisfaction. *Being the Senoca Regent certainly has its advantages, such as being able to have my fill of exceptionally beautiful twins, as well as a harem of sex slaves to satisfy each and every one of my wishes.*

He felt a sting of pain in one temple. *Too much wine last night… I must go easy on the wine… But what's a night of lust without alcohol?* A tisane of Miratos' special herbs and the pain would disappear. He had to admit that his personal Surgeon was a master of healing, as well as other arts which helped to keep the slaves docile.

He clapped twice to wake the sisters. "Come on, you bitches! Get up! Out of my bed!"

At his shouts, two of his personal guards came at once and dragged the slaves away.

Sesmok went on to the aromatic baths to be washed by his personal servant girls, who anointed him with exquisite fragrances, dressed and groomed him. Sesmok abhorred un-cleanliness and bad smells; they

reminded him of his disgusting origins, which represented something he never intended to return to. *And if I had to kill half the Senoca to make sure of it, I'd do it without remorse.*

He breakfasted, as usual, on exotic fruits, and prepared for the day. He was looking forward to enjoying a quiet day, for after all a man with his responsibilities must not succumb to pressure and needed to relax as much as possible. *The fate of the Senoca, the future of our whole race, depends on me. There's only me between our people and the Gods, between the Senoca and annihilation at the hands of creatures to whom we're no more than ants.* He heaved a sigh. *Truly, it's a huge responsibility: one which I accept and live with daily.* But today he would not be able to relax, no matter how much he needed to. They had denied it to him.

He had to find the Heroes.

He had to put an end to the Resistance.

At whatever the cost, come what may…

His life was at stake, and he was not going to take the slightest risk. *I'll find them if I have to personally search every corner of the Boundary!* He did not fear fighting them; what he feared was what they represented. He could not allow a movement to rise against him, could not appear weak before the Gods. A simple misstep, a show of weakness, and the Gods would finish him off. He held the post of Regent because he was efficient at his job and served the Gods well. All the demands they made of the Senoca were met, because he himself made sure of it.

With somber thoughts plaguing his mind, he went into the throne hall, as he liked to refer to the sumptuous hall from which he ruled the Senoca, with its thermal baths and luxurious hangings. Even to him that much luxury seemed excessive, but he remembered the sewers where he had grown up, the stench, the rats he had been obliged to eat, and felt that no ostentation could ever be sufficient. *I've come a long way, no doubt of that. And no-one's going to take it away from me, not even the Gods themselves!*

"Dancers, my lord? asked one of his personal servants.

"Not today."

"Some other pleasure…?"

"It's too early for that, and I'm not in the mood … Wait. Bring me the High Priest Torkem, and the Lord Hunter Osvan, I want to speak to them.

Presto!”

“As you order, my lord.”

Torkem and Osvan did not take long to arrive. They knew what Sesmok’s temper was like when he was made to wait.

Osvan bowed. “You called for us, my lord?”

“We have urgent business to deal with.” Sesmok said. His voice was stern.

The High Priest bent his chubby body.

Sesmok stood up very straight and glared at him. “What have you found out about the rebellion against me? Have you found out who they are, and who their leader is? There’s a limit to my patience, you know.”

“My lord, infiltrating the organization has been a very difficult process. It’s taken us a long time. Putting the piece in the right place at the right time is extremely complicated…”

“The head of the snake must be cut off. Without a head, the reptile will die.”

“Certainly, my lord. I’ll soon have the information you want; I just need a little more time…”

“Every day that goes by the rumors grow… more and more of those stupid slaves believe in the rebels and their foolish message of freedom. Freedom! Hah! As if the Gods would allow it! They’ll destroy us all without a second thought! This crazy band of rebels painting red hands all over my villages and cities – in my domains! – they dare defy me. Me! Their Regent! I simply can’t allow that. It makes me appear weak, and if the Gods get wind of that, it’ll be the end of me!”

“That won’t happen, my lord, I can guarantee it!”

“You’d better, High Priest. Because if I fall I’ll drag you down with me, I’ll drag both of you down with me, and your deaths will be long and tortuous.” He jabbed his finger at Torkem and Osvan.

“My faith in you is beginning to wane,” he added to Torkem. “Let me remind you that if you’re with me it’s for your skills at interrogation and gathering information. But if you fail to get it you cease to be useful to me…”

“I’m very close to it. My spies will report soon, and we’ll have them. I give you my word.”

“That had better be the case,” Sesmok said menacingly. He was irked at the lack of results. He had been after the conspirators for months, but could not manage to capture the leaders who were planning to overthrow him, and that infuriated him. *If this great lump of fat doesn’t get me what he’s promised, I’ll hang him in the garden by his balls and leave him there until the crows eat him.*

“We’ve captured several rebels at a clandestine meeting on the outskirts of the capital,” Torkem hastened to say. “They were preparing messages for the capitals of the Six Counties.”

“Messages?”

“Yes, my lord, instructions to keep the rumor of subversion going among the slaves.”

“Who were they addressed to?”

“I believe to the leaders of each County. We don’t have their names yet. But I’m putting the captured rebels under my personal interrogation.” Torkem smiled perversely. “They’ll soon talk. Don’t worry, my lord, they always talk…”

“Don’t fail me, or I’ll have you castrated and then I’ll give you your private parts to savor.”

Torkem fell silent and nodded with a heavy bow.

Sesmok gave a deep sigh. “These fools believe I’m blind and deaf, that I can’t read their covert movements behind me. But I see them. I always have. Nobody conspires against me without my knowing. Stupid fools! I’ll skin them all and hang their guts out to dry in the sun!”

“And you’d do well, my lord.” Osvan said.

The Regent stole a thoughtful glance at the leader of the Hunters. He could understand why the rabble referred to him as the Black Bear. He was a tall, well-built man, with black curly hair and a thick beard, but above all he was extremely strong. He had an impressive presence, and his temperament inspired fear. He was capable of pulling off a man’s head in a rage, something which had happened once already.

“I’ll do more than that, Lord Hunter, a lot more… I’ll make a public example on such a scale that no-one for the next hundred years will even dream of a new rising. I’ll skin and hang every rebel and their families in every square of every village. By the Gods, I’ll do it! Your Hunters, Osvan, will have more work than they could ever have imagined!”

The Lord Hunter and the High Priest remained silent, gazing at him in surprise. It was not often that Sesmok lost his temper. He was an intelligent man, astute and very subtle. This unbalanced overreaction took them by surprise.

The double door to the room opened and Svariz, the Chief Commander of the Guard, came in with a firm step. He was a broad-shouldered man with an easy walk. He wore white and silver dress armor and carried two short swords at his waist. He gave Sesmok a curt bow.

“What’s up?”

“Four Eyes-of-the-Gods are waiting in the ante-room. They desire an immediate audience.”

“Bloody Enforcers!” Sesmok clenched his fists.

“My men are watching the area around the palace. They’ve come without Executors.”

“What can they want now? Why don’t they leave me in peace!”

“What shall I tell them, my lord?”

“Tell them I’ll see them. What else can I say to them? Those square-heads wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“As you wish.”

“Svariz.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Reinforce the palace Guard and personally protect the entrance.”

“Will do, sir.” The soldier turned, saluted Torkem and Osvan with a nod, bowed to Sesmok and went out.

“You two, take a seat and listen in silence.”

The Eyes-of-the-Gods came into the hall with their stiff walk. The four moved like one, as if a single entity were driving them. It would not have surprised Sesmok if the Gods pulled the strings of these puppets of theirs in

some way he could never understand. He had to hide the disgust they inspired in him, and swallowed hard. They stopped in front of him, but made no gesture of greeting; they never did. He would have given his right arm to yank off their sinister helmets and see what was underneath.

The four waited in silence, as if expecting Sesmok to kneel before them. *I'll never kneel before you, you lousy dogs! I'm not just another slave. I'm the Regent of the Senoca! And even though you don't show me the respect I'm due, I'll never bow to you, you contemptible servants of a bunch of despotic Gods!* His eyes lingered on the front of the nearest Eye's helmet. The two silver triangles which covered the left and right sides of the face, separated by a thin golden strip, seemed to swallow his own image instead of reflecting it back. *Those horrible helmets are just a trick to intimidate the slaves, but not me. I'm a lot smarter than that. I'm not scared by them or their Executors. They're nothing more than brainless puppets of their Gods.* He clenched his jaw.

A tense silence fell between the four Eyes and Sesmok.

Bloody creatures out of a nightmare! I'd better put an end to this and not make things any tenser. I can't stand having them here, and I don't want to run any unnecessary risks.

He feigned indifference. "You requested an audience?"

One of the four Eyes stepped forward. "That is so," he said in his shrieking voice.

Something inside Sesmok told him to proceed with extreme caution. It was time to use his brain and not let himself be carried away by his temper.

"What do the Gods want of their humble servant today?" he said. The servility in his own words almost poisoned him.

"The Gods, my masters, want to make sure the Regent understands the importance of the special order he was charged with."

"The Regent understands the importance of the special order," Sesmok said, immediately realizing the reason for the visit. *They're here to put pressure on me, the bastards!*

"Seven are the slaves my masters have charged you with capturing."

"Yes, the seven who escaped from the Eternal City." Sesmok nodded heavily, so the Enforcer might see it clearly. "We're searching for them." He indicated Torkem and Osvan.

“How many have been captured?

Sesmok tensed. “We haven’t been able to capture any of them yet. It’s a difficult task to find seven slaves among a hundred and twenty thousand, more so when the only description we have is that they’re around the age of eighteen and that there are five women and two men.”

“Then you have not understood the urgency of the special order.”

“I do understand the urgency, but I need more time. The High Priest’s spies are gathering information and Lord Osvan’s Hunters are tracking outside the Boundary. But it’s a very complex task.”

“Incompetence is something the Gods will not tolerate. You have been given a task. Carry it out.” The shriek of the Enforcer had become shriller.

“I shall carry it out, you can assure the Gods of that.”

“This errand comes directly from my House,” the Enforcer said, indicating his blue sash. “It is an order from the High King of the House of the Fifth Ring.”

Sesmok’s stomach lurched. The cursed Enforcers had forgotten to mention that particular detail. A detail which came with a death threat. He glanced at his two men of trust and saw they had gone pale. All three of them understood that it was their own necks which were at stake.

“I wasn’t apprised of that detail. I fully understand the importance and urgency of the errand. You may assure your master that it will be carried out without delay. I’ll capture the seven and present them to him.”

“That is what I shall tell my master. Let me remind you, moreover, that this Boundary, that of the Senoca, belongs to my lord and master, and he can do or undo at his will. One order from him and the entire hierarchy and government will be eliminated.” The shriek was now cold, lethal.

“I… understand…” Sesmok said. The threat had frozen the blood in his veins.

“Or he might decide, as is his prerogative as the God responsible for this Boundary, to decimate the population, starting with this city.”

The Regent nodded and was silent. He did not need any more threats. He knew perfectly well what the Gods were capable of, still more one of the five High Kings.

The Enforcer eyed Sesmok in silence for a moment longer, as if weighing up the effect of his words on the Regent. He finally turned and left, as stiffly as he had come in. The other three followed.

It took Sesmok a few moments to assimilate what had happened. This was a direct order from Edan himself, the High King of the House of Aru. *My life is hanging by a thread here. I'll be a dead man if I don't hand those seven over to them. I've got to think of some way to find them and capture them.*

"Those accursed Eyes-of-the-Gods! They dare to threaten me! This is a very, very dangerous situation." He pointed at Torkem and Osvan. "For all of us."

"The High King Edan…" stammered Torkem.

"We have to capture them, and fast." Osvan's voice did not tremble, but his tone was less resolute than usual.

Sesmok was turning the problem over in his mind in search of some way out. "The stupid cretins haven't been able to give me so much as a hint as to where to look for them."

"My Hunters have been searching outside the Boundary, but there's no trace of them. The problem is, it's hard to catch a prey without a trail to follow."

The door opened again and Svariz came in. The three looked up with interest.

"Now what?" Sesmok asked bad-temperedly.

Svariz bowed. "They're asking for a new audience, my lord.

"Who's asking?"

"The Eyes, my lord."

Sesmok was surprised. The Eyes-of-the-Gods lived for efficiency. They did not forget or repeat anything, ever.

"How strange… I don't like this at all. Executors?"

"No, my lord, just one Eye."

"One of the four who were here before?" Torkem asked.

Svariz shrugged. "How could I tell? They all look the same to me."

"Bring him in, but escort him and don't take your eyes off him."

“Yes, my lord.” Svariz saluted. “On guard, everyone,” he said to his Guards as he went out.

In fact the Eye-of-the-Gods who came in looked like the four others, with the same helmet, the same robe, the same gaunt look and ochre color. Svariz was behind him, his hands on his weapons at the ready.

“Has anything new come up? Something to do with the errand?” Sesmok asked.

The Eye looked around. “I have a message for the Regent, from my master.”

Sesmok waved his hands. “You have my absolute attention.”

“The message is for the Regent only.” He looked around once again.

This is getting worse. Why does he want to be alone with me? Is it some trick to kill me? Tension was beginning to clutch at his stomach. *No, think about it, it makes no sense. If they wanted me dead they’d send Executors.* He took a deep breath. To refuse would be dangerous, but he did not relish the idea of being left alone with the Enforcer. *I could have Svariz and the Guard kill him. Strike before they strike me. But killing an Enforcer of the Gods would be practically signing my own death sentence. I’ll listen to what he has to say and then act accordingly.*

“All right, everyone leave.”

Svariz and Osvan waited for a sign from Sesmok, but he gave a slight shake of his head.

The Enforcer waited until the doors were shut. When he had checked that the two of them were alone, he nodded.

Sesmok came closer to the Enforcer. “What message does the High King Edan send me?”

The Eye-of-the-Gods looked around once more, as if expecting to see someone spying. He reached for his blue sash and turned it over. To Sesmok’s surprise, the inside was bright red.

“My master is not High King Edan.” he said. “I belong to the House of Aureb, not that of Aru.” From his robe he brought out a gauntlet and put it on his hand. Then he took out a crystalline object and placed it over the gauntlet. Sesmok saw it was a disc. Something inside him warned him, and he tensed. The disc gave off a golden flash, and he started. Suddenly the

disc rose above the gauntlet and threw a powerful beam of light in front of him. He covered his face with his arm, thinking the beam would pierce him. But it did not. Instead an image formed before his astonished eyes, the image of a figure, blurred at first but soon more definite.

“What… what’s that?”

“This is the Power of the Gods,” said the figure in its red robe and bright silver armor, which although it resembled a man was not really one at all… Nor was it an Enforcer. It was something different: slim, golden, stern in its gaze, with fiery eyes… terrifying eyes…

It was a God!

On the ground, worm! the Golden ordered, like thunder in his head.

Sesmok threw himself down, with his forehead touching the floor. He was so scared he almost wet himself. In all his life he had only once seen a God: the day he had been chosen to be Regent. It had been a day of abysmal fear.

That is better, vermin. Show the respect you owe me.

His legs were shaking and he did not dare look at the image. He remained on the floor in silence, trying with all his might not to tremble.

The House of Aru has ordered you to find the seven fugitive slaves.

“Yes… my lord…” he dared to mumble.

I want you to carry out that mission, but with one exception.

“Whatever you wish… my lord…”

There is one among the seven who is mine by right, and I want her for myself. One who was stolen and whom I must possess. One whose suffering and death I intend to enjoy at length. You will not give her to the House of Aru, you will give her to me.

“To you?”

“To his Majesty Asu, Prince Heir of the House of Aureb,” the Eye-of-the-Gods announced.

To me alone. Do you understand, or do I have to carve it in fire on your forehead?

“Yes, I understand,” Sesmok hastened to reply. “I will… you have my word.”

You had better not fail me. I want her for myself, and my wishes must not be denied.

“I won’t fail you. But what am I going to say to the House of Aru?”

Your problems with that rival House are none of my business. They will not have the slave. If they get her, I shall tear your guts out.

“How will I recognize her?” Sesmok asked. He was wondering about his new predicament. If he failed to deliver to the House of Aru, they would kill him. And if he did not deliver to Asu, the latter would kill him instead. *I’m in a tight fit, and I’m not going to get out of it easily.*

The Eye spoke. “Her name is Kyra, her hair and eyes are ruby-colored. She is seventeen springs old. With her is her brother Ikai. It has been found that they are from a village in the Sixth County called Issoli.”

“With this information I’m sure to find her.”

Do it and do it fast, or my flames will put an end to your insignificant existence.

Asu snapped his fingers and spoke one word. All around Sesmok a ring of fire took shape.

“No, by the Seas!” he cried in horror as the flames rose to the ceiling.

And one more thing. This conversation has never taken place. It has never happened. If you should mention it to anyone I shall roast you on a slow fire like a pig, and while you scream in agony, a moment before you die I shall revive you to roast you again. Understood?

Sesmok was shaking in the center of the ring of fire. “Yes, my lord. This has never taken place.”

Indeed. And to make sure my wishes are satisfied, I shall send you someone I trust, so that you can hand the girl over to him.

“How… how will I recognize him?”

Ha, ha, ha! You will recognize him, you worm, I can assure you of that.

And with that ruthless laughter echoing in his mind, the image vanished and with it the ring of fire. The Eye-of-the-Gods put the disc away in his robe, took off the gauntlet and left without another word.

Sesmok was left sprawling on the floor. It took him some time to recover.

When Torkem, Osvan and Svariz ran into the hall they were stunned to see the Regent trying unsuccessfully to stand up. They helped him to the throne, and he sat down on it, still shaking.

“What happened?” Osvan asked.

“I… I can’t tell you.”

“But are you all right?” Torkem asked.

“I’m… I mean we’re in really big trouble. And it’s going to be very difficult to get out of it alive.”

“What needs to be done?” Torkem asked.

“You follow that Eye. I want him watched. Make sure your spies inform me about every move he makes, and who he meets.”

“Understood.” He left at a run, surprisingly nimbly considering his girth.

Osvan glanced at Svariz. “And what about us?” he asked

“You’re going for a trip into the country, to catch a farmer girl.”

Chapter 11

For two weeks Kyra did all she could to carry out Ikai's instructions. She had moved into Solma's house, leaving her own: the grateful refugees had built each of the seven heroes a small house as a token of respect and gratitude. Kyra wanted to be with her mother at all times. Every morning she got up before dawn, hardly having managed to rest herself, to look after Solma. She waited hopefully for Idana to appear so that she could ask her about any possible improvement. Unfortunately the answer was the same every day: there was none.

In spite of an afflicted heart and the sadness which weighed on her soul like a mountain, every new dawn she forced herself to believe. She repeated to herself: *Ikai will get the remedy that'll cure Mother, I'm sure he will.* After leaving Solma in Idana's care she trained with Urda and the volunteers, working to strengthen them and improve their handling of weapons. Afterwards she went to the watch-posts and spent some time chatting with the men and women on duty, making sure everything was all right and everybody was safe. In the afternoons she involved herself in the thousand and one tasks still to be done at the Shelter: from building a palisade or houses and barns to felling trees and preparing fields for crops. Now that Ikai and Isaz had left with Albana, it was up to her to take her brother's place, and she did it willingly, although not even half as well as he did. *In another life I'll ask Oxatsi to bless me with the patience she forgot to give me in this one.*

That evening Kyra was eating her supper of vegetable soup and smoked fish. Dull-eyed, she watched her beloved mother on her bed. But something caught her attention: she could barely perceive her breathing. It startled her. She knelt beside her and took her hands in her own. They were colder than they ought to be. *Something's wrong!* She got up and ran in search of Idana.

"What's wrong with her?" she asked, while the apothecary examined her carefully.

Her friend did not answer, but went on checking the whole of Solma's body. She massaged her and made her drink one of her herb tisanes.

"She's worse, isn't she?" Kyra asked. There were tears in her eyes.

Idana nodded. She looked worried.

"She's weaker. Her condition's deteriorating…"

"I can't bear it. I'm watching her die. It breaks my heart."

"Be strong, Kyra. Your brother will soon be back, and we'll heal her."

"Do you really believe that? How can you be sure?"

Idana bowed her head and shook it gently. "I can't be. I wish I was… you know I'd give my right arm to be sure."

"I know you do everything you can, that you'd do anything for her. It's not you I should be upset with, it's the fate that seems to have it in for my family."

"Don't worry, Kyra. It's normal to be furious, to curse your fate and the whole world. It's the pain speaking, not you."

"Why her? She's never harmed anybody… She's an exceptional woman. She raised Ikai and me practically on her own, and she was already sick."

"Has she always been like this? When did it start, do you remember?"

"I really couldn't say. At first she didn't want us to know she was sick, but I think she's been that way since we were babies."

"That's an interesting fact…"

"There's something else you don't know, Idana… that very few people know…"

"You can trust me. I'll take your secret with me to the grave."

Kyra knew Idana would never betray her, so she decided to tell her what had happened during Notaplo's experiment, and what Albana had said to her.

"Hybrid? That's… that's fascinating…"

"I don't see it that way, not in the least. And I'm not sure I really am a Hybrid. I asked Mother, but she told me I couldn't be."

"Curious… Solma denied it… and yet her illness is one of the blood… degenerative…"

“You don’t believe she lied to me, do you? She’s never lied to me before. She wouldn’t…”

“Mothers will do whatever’s necessary to protect their children. Even lie to them.”

“Do you think her illness might have some connection with this possible blood-mix?”

“It might very well be. There’s another significant detail… the fact that she became ill right after your birth, or perhaps during it… that makes me think… yes, it’s very significant…”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at, Idana.”

“They’re just guesses. I don’t have any answers, but it opens up possibilities I hadn’t considered. Unfortunately I have no solutions, and her state is worsening…”

“I can’t just stay and watch her die. I have to do something. Are you sure the Witch option is the right one?”

“It’s the one my instincts suggest – but no, I’m not totally sure.”

“What if we don’t run any risks?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if we choose both options?”

“Ikai’s already left…”

“But I haven’t.”

“No, Kyra, you can’t go after Miratos. That’s crazy!”

“My mother’s getting worse, she’s dying. I must do something. The Regent’s Surgeon is a reasonable option. I’ll bring him.”

“But Kyra… the risk… Sesmok’ll capture you!”

“I’m not afraid of him or his henchmen. You know me. It’s not easy to scare me. And the risk is worth taking if I can save her life.”

Idana was shaking her head. “Ikai will manage it. Wait for your brother.”

“And if he doesn’t? If he doesn’t get back in time?”

Idana sighed. “I’m sure he will.”

“That’s because you’ve got a good heart and you’re an optimist, and I say that affectionately.”

The apothecary smiled kindly at her friend.

Kyra put her hands on her hips. “I don’t see any other option. I have to cover all my bets. Tell me, could Miratos be the right option, instead of the Witch? Could he?”

Idana turned worried eyes to Solma. She sighed and nodded reluctantly.

“Then there’s nothing left to say. I’ll go for him and drag him here by the neck. And if I have to fight the entire capital Guard, then I will.”

“In that case you’ll need me,” came a voice from the door.

The two girls turned to see the robust figure of Urda.

“How long have you been there listening?”

“Long enough.”

“You don’t have to come with me.”

“Oh, I think I do. Your brother will kill me if I let you go by yourself, and I don’t fancy arguing you out of it. I know you well enough to know that when something gets into your head…”

Kyra shrugged.

“Besides,” Urda added, flexing her biceps with a look so sullen it would have scared a panther, “you’ll need me.”

Kyra was won over. “We leave at dawn,” she said.

“I’ll be ready.”

Idana tried to dissuade them, but in vain. Finally she gave up. She needed all the help she could get. Solma was dying, and nothing would put Kyra off.

“How long do we have?” Kyra asked.

“Not much. With things getting worse at this rate I think I can keep her stable a few more weeks. I couldn’t say how many… I’ll do my best to keep her alive, but honestly, I don’t believe we have much time. The capital, Osaen, is a long way from here. It takes weeks to get there. I doubt whether you can get there and back before she leaves us…”

“I’m not going to give up! I have to make it, I must save her! We’ll just have to move fast. Very fast!”

“Very,” Urda agreed.

“We’ll make it. You keep my mother alive. We’ll get back in time with the Surgeon. You have my word on that.”

Kyra bent to kiss her mother goodbye. “Hold on. I’ll come back with a cure for you, I promise.”

The warm dawn found the two friends leaving the island with satchels on their shoulders and weapons at their waists. Kyra looked back over her shoulder for one last time and said goodbye to the Shelter. Leaving it behind, together with all its people, she felt an unexpected sorrow which surprised her. *In the end this place has gotten under my skin. I’m like my brother.* She shook off the thought and went into the forest, with Urda at her back. They kept up an unyielding pace until well into the evening, when they were forced to stop for lack of visibility. They sank to the ground under a beech tree to rest and have something to eat. They lit a small fire: in that area there were only wild animals, so they had no fear of being discovered. In fact it was a good idea to light a fire to dissuade the marauding beasts.

While they were having their supper Kyra shivered.

“Everything all right?” Urda asked with a frown.

“I have a bad feeling. Something doesn’t feel right…

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, and that’s why I don’t like it.”

Urda reached for the bow which lay beside her. “Easy. I’ll be on the lookout.”

Kyra winked at her. “Thanks. That makes me feel better.”

With the first rays of sun coming through the branches, they set off again. Kyra set a very fast pace. Time was short, and she was well aware that they had to keep up this exhausting pace if they wanted to get back in time to save Solma. She glanced aside at her friend. She was unsure she would be able to keep up with her, bearing in mind her size. It was already exhausting for Kyra herself, and she dared not even think what it must be like for Urda.

On the evening of the fifth day her friend came clean.

“I don’t think I can keep up this pace another day.”

Kyra nodded. Her friend’s face was drained. She recovered to some extent at night, but each day she walked a little more slowly. The pain showed more and more clearly in her face, even though she never once complained.

“I know what you mean. I’m at the limit of my strength too.”

“I’m sorry, I hate delaying you… running isn’t my thing… my body…”

“Tomorrow we’ll go easier and get some strength back.”

“But you’ll fall behind… your mother…”

“Don’t worry. We’ll make it.”

“Maybe you should go on without me… It might be best… I’ll join you in the capital.”

“I’m not going to leave you. We’ll both go.”

“Kyra…”

“We’ll both go, and that’s that.”

They went on for two more days. In the end Kyra had to give in to the evidence, Urda could go no further; her massive body had taken all the punishment it could. She needed to rest and walk on at an easier pace at least for a couple of days, to regain some strength. The big soldier was as white as a sheet, and though she had spoken little enough before, now it was impossible to get a word out of her. Kyra set up camp for the night beside a brook. Urda leaned back against an oak and fell asleep with a piece of cheese in her hand before she had even had time to eat it.

Poor Urda, she’s given all she had to give, but she can’t go on. She poked the fire and wondered what she ought to do. *I don’t want to leave her behind, but I’ve still got enough strength to go on at a fair pace.* At that moment that strange feeling came over her once again, and a shiver ran down her spine. *What’s wrong with me! It must be just because I’m so tired.*

“Urda’s right,” came a man’s voice from the darkness. “You’ll have to leave her behind.”

Kyra’s heart missed a beat. She turned like a panther and reached for the throwing dagger she carried at the back of her belt.

“You don’t need the dagger, I’m a friend,” the voice said, and a hooded figure appeared by the fire.

Kyra looked in Urda’s direction, but she was deeply asleep. She would not be able to rouse her in time. She raised the hand which held the dagger.

“Easy, Kyra, it’s me,” the young man said. He pushed back the hood and removed the scarf that covered the lower part of his face.

Kyra narrowed her eyes and recognized him.

“Romen! By Oxatsi, what the hell are you doing here? I almost killed you!”

Romen smiled. Kyra saw the gleam of his large blue eyes and his handsome face beneath hair as black as night.

“Yes, you have a certain tendency to throw first and ask later.”

“By the Enforcers! What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been following you since the evening of the day you left.”

“But why, for goodness’ sake?”

“Would you mind lowering your arm?” he asked with a smile. “It makes me nervous when I see that dagger ready to search out my neck.”

Kyra lowered her arm with a muttered curse.

“For some reason you forgot to mention this expedition of yours. I found out you had left at nightfall. A goodbye would have been nice.”

“It’s none of your business. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“But you see, actually it is my business. If Ikai leaves the Shelter, then you do the same, it makes no sense for me to stay. After all, I came to get your help.”

“Well, we can’t help you. So go on your way and stop following me.”

“Luckily Idana’s a girl with a great heart. She told me what’s happening and the reason you’re both away. I understand what you’re trying to do, and I think I can help.”

“Idana!” Kyra moaned. She knew her friend had acted out of goodwill, but she should not have talked to strangers about it. And Romen, even though he was with Liriana and the resistance, was a stranger.

He smiled. “Don’t blame her. I insisted a lot.” He crouched beside the fire to warm his hands.

“How are you going to help me?”

“Kidnapping the Regent’s Surgeon is a crazy idea. But you’ll need someone who knows the capital, Sesmok’s palace and the surgeons’ quarters very well. And that’s me.”

“For the sake of Girlai Father Moon who’s watching us right now, if you were any more conceited your face would fall off!”

“And I bet you’ve forgotten that important detail.” Romen laughed. “I admit I’m a little conceited, but in this case I’m sure of my knowledge. I know the city like the back of my hand. I’ve patrolled it with the Guard for years. I’ve been in all the quadrants and neighborhoods and I know every corner. That much I can guarantee. And as far as I know, you’ve only been there once…”

Kyra wrinkled her nose and muttered something inaudible.

“Listen to me. You’re going to need me in there. It’s a hornets’ nest. One false movement and the whole swarm will fall on you. You won’t survive.”

Urda had woken up by now, and she joined them by the fire. “He’s right,” she said.

Kyra looked at her friend, who nodded.

She gave in. “All right, then! But if you put my mother’s life in danger I’ll cut you open.”

Romen smiled and sat down in front of the fire. “That won’t be necessary.”

At dawn Kyra said goodbye to Urda, put her arms round her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll be right behind you,” her friend assured her. “See you in the capital.”

“We´ll meet there!”

Romen came up by her side, matching his pace to her own.

“Will you be able to keep up with me?” she asked defiantly.

“I think so. We’ll soon find out.”

Kyra went on for days, at the limit of her strength. Every day she went through agonies as she marched as fast as her body would allow. And every

day she ran out of breath and was forced to walk instead of run. It was a small defeat which gnawed at her inside. But she kept going all the same. Every evening she was even more tired, until at last she was not even able to set up camp. Her legs ached terribly and she had such cramps that she could not sleep. Romen offered to massage her exhausted muscles, and she threw a satchel at his head. But the following evening the pain was so intense that she swallowed her pride and begged him to help her. His firm hands massaged her back and legs, and she let herself enjoy the pleasant sensation until she fell asleep. That night, instead of nightmares, she had very pleasant dreams.

The following day they reached the Boundary.

“How I hate this wretched barrier of the Gods!” Kyra muttered. She could see her left arm shaking uncontrollably now that the Ring was so near the translucent barrier.

“How are we going to manage this? One of us has to cross, while the other watches till the one who’s crossed wakes up.”

“You cross and I’ll watch,” Kyra said sarcastically.

Romen looked at her in amusement. “You realize that then it’ll be your turn to cross, and it’ll be me who’s awake, not you?”

“That’s enough of that! And stop smiling at me!”

Romen laughed, bent forward in a mock bow, and crossed the Boundary.

Kyra watched until the rebel woke up and recovered from the unpleasant effects of crossing. Then he went off to reconnoiter the surroundings.

“All clear,” he said when he came back. “You can cross.”

Kyra hesitated for an instant and finally made up her mind.

“Nothing had better happen to me, or else I’ll wipe that bloody smile off your face with a stick!”

Romen shook his head, laughing.

When she awoke, her entire body aching and disoriented, she was between tall shrubs, next to an oak. She looked around to see Romen crouching behind her looking out at the fields.

“At last! I thought you were going to sleep all day.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I tried but you were in a pitiful state. I couldn’t manage to bring you round, so I hid you here.”

“Damn! We have to go on.” She got to her feet and picked up satchel and weapons.

“Where are we headed? The capital’s more than three weeks away, and honestly, I don’t think you’re in a fit state to get there.”

“I have a plan.”

Romen raised his brows in puzzlement. “A plan? You?”

“Yes, me! Shut up and follow me.”

“But where are we going? Let me remind you, just in case you’ve forgotten, that here there are Enforcers, the Guard and Hunters, and they all want our heads. Particularly the head of a Hero.”

Kyra narrowed her eyes “Of course I haven’t forgotten.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“We’re going to get ourselves horses.”

“Really? And where are we going to get them? As far as I know, only merchants and rich families have them.”

“I know where to get them.”

“Where?”

“In Issoli, my village.”

“Isn’t it just a village of farmers?”

“But the Proxy of Issoli has a stable behind where he lives, with quite a few horses in it.”

“Proxy? You want to steal horses from a Proxy?”

“Not exactly. I’ll ask him nicely first.”

Romen shook his head firmly. “Have you lost your mind? How are you going to ask a Proxy? You’ll be put in jail immediately.”

“This Proxy helped my brother. He might help me too.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“We´ll steal his horses.”

“At least if he doesn’t imprison us first,” Romen said.

She smiled mischievously. “What would life be without a bit of excitement?”

Romen rolled his eyes. He was about to reply, but Kyra ran off down the field.

“Oh hell,” he protested as he ran after her. “This is going to end badly for us. Very badly…”

Chapter 12

The door opened with a barely audible creak. Adamis glanced over his shoulder and saw the Champion of the House of Eret coming into his quarters. For an instant his mind played tricks on him, and with a surge of happiness he thought it was Rotec. But sadly his friend would never come to see him again. A stinging pain pierced his heart, as if this absence were a dagger soaked in acid. Tears pricked at his eyes.

“Excuse me, your Highness,” Teslo said with a brief bow. “Your father the High King awaits you in the Throne Hall.”

Adamis went on gazing at the landscape revealed from the open balcony. From that height he could see the whole southern part of the First Ring, with its palaces, monuments and translucent buildings, extending in a semi-circle of shining glass forms until it reached the turquoise blue of the sea. Ships swayed in silence at their moorings. Ever since he was a boy Adamis had had the impression that if he dropped a pebble from his balcony it would roll downhill and shatter the glass buildings on its way to the water, where it would vanish in its depths. But that was just an optical illusion, since the glass was robust, just as his wish to escape and follow that pebble into the depths was an impossible illusion. He was the Prince of the House of Eret, and there was no other possible fate for him, except death.

He took a long breath and went on staring out. To the east he could make out two of the great marble and granite bridges which joined the First Ring to the Second, the house of his sworn enemy. *One day they’ll pay, Rotec. They’ll pay for robbing you of a thousand springs of joy and life, I swear.*

“Your Highness…” Teslo insisted softly.

Adamis turned. “Forgive me, Teslo, I was lost in thought. You may hand me my armor and cape.”

“Right away, my lord.”

Adamis finished dressing. He wore a white dress tunic with silver embroidery, and over it the armor of golden scales which covered him from neck to thighs. It was too showy for his taste, but he knew the occasion required it. His limbs were covered by greaves and gauntlets, also of gold. A white cape, almost transparent, hung from his shoulders. He hoped his father would approve. He was a very traditional figure, with fixed rules which had to be respected at all times.

After checking his attire he looked closely at his new Champion and Protector. He was young, his skin gave off reflections of still-healthy gold, and he was very tall, at least a hand taller than Adamis himself. His shoulders were as broad and muscular as Rotec’s. To have been crowned Champion he must certainly be a remarkable warrior. His head was shaven except for the long braid which hung down his back, in the style of the Soldiers. His face on the other hand was very different from Rotec’s, much more angular, with eyes dark as night. This had surprised Adamis, as it was not very common in his House, where light eyes were the norm.

“Are you happy with your new position?”

Teslo stood to attention. “It is the greatest of honors, your Highness.”

Adamis smiled. “That is not what I asked you…”

“Of course… yes, your Highness, I am very pleased. The highest aspiration of a Soldier is to reach the rank of Champion of his House, to become a protector of the Royal family and lead the army in battle when his King commands it.”

Adamis looked at the impressive soldier and nodded with the trace of a smile.

“Let us hope my father never asks you to, for the good of all… *Only dreamers and poets praise the virtue and nobility of war, and only a madman or a fool goes to it with blind eyes and spellbound heart.*”

Teslo narrowed his eyes. “I do not know that saying…”

“I am not surprised. It is by an old philosopher, Utrumis, who lived some five thousand years ago. His texts fell out of favor with the nobility, particularly among the Royal Houses. All Alantres turned against him. His views on many subjects important to society were considered… let us say, subversive. He had many problems… and one day he disappeared, or else

he was made to disappear; it will never be known which. Luckily his works have been kept in the common fount of knowledge. I have always been fascinated by his essays. He reminds me of the reality we face and how close we always are to making a mistake without intending to – or even with the best of intentions – and thus launch ourselves into an abyss of pain and death. Like the one you, my Champion, want to bring about."

"I do not understand, your Highness…"

"I have heard the rumor. I know you are hoping to challenge Iradu, the Champion of the House of Aureb, to a death duel, to avenge the death of your predecessor Rotec."

Teslo lowered his head, and his long braid fell to one side.

"The wish does you credit, and I know you do it for the honor of our House, but let me assure you it is a mistake. For two reasons: first, at this critical moment it would bring about war, and that is something my father has forbidden. And second, you would lose."

"I can defeat him, my lord, I assure you! The offense cannot remain unpunished!"

"No, you cannot. You are too young and inexperienced to face him. As for the offense, I will deal with that, at the appropriate time."

"But I am the best warrior in the House of Eret!"

"You are indeed, but unfortunately the best of my House cannot defeat Iradu. That I know."

"Allow me to show you."

"No. I forbid you to dare Iradu, I forbid you to let your actions cause offense to our rival House. You shall not draw your weapons without my permission."

"I live to serve you. I will obey your command, your Highness."

"Then that is that," Adamis said with a friendly slap on the warrior's massive shoulder. "And now let us go and see my dear father. I believe he is impatient to give me an exemplary punishment."

Adamis walked uneasily into the throne hall. With slow steps he crossed the hall, which was eternally covered by a low mist, glancing at everyone there, and bent one knee before his father the High King, who was waiting on his throne. His Majesty was accompanied by his wife the Queen, who sat beside him on the transparent Ethereal Throne. When he saw his mother Adamis was even more upset; she only came to the throne in the case of some very serious matter for the kingdom. He noticed Notaplo standing to one side. There was no-one else in the chamber, not even the Guard of Honor. They were alone.

This gets worse by the moment, he thought as he eyed the old Erudite's worried face.

"Did you call for me, my lord King?" he said with the respect he truly felt.

The High King did not answer, so that Adamis was obliged to look directly at him. As he did, he realized this was exactly what his father was looking for. He found the High King's eyes fixed on him, eyes of such light grey they reminded him of morning mist on a silvery lake. A mist which hid the King's well-known intelligence deep in that lake which was his profound and prodigious mind.

Laino nodded, watching his son very carefully as if he did not recognize him, as if he were somebody else.

Adamis bore the scrutiny stoically, although there was a knot in his stomach which was growing and would soon force him to bend double.

"What were you thinking of?" the King asked faintly, with a voice as soft and distant as a murmur from the faraway continent of the slaves.

Adamis looked away, ashamed and troubled. "Always of the wellbeing of my House," he answered, as he knew he ought.

"My ears hear the correct answer, but is it truly so?" Laino said. There was doubt in his soft yet penetrating voice.

"You know it, my father and King. You know me well."

Laino clasped his fingers together and watched his son in silence for a long moment.

Adamis turned pleadingly to his mother, but she was looking elsewhere. The Queen would not help him, not before the High King.

“There was a time when I knew,” Laino murmured, “a time when I thought I knew my son, my heir. I would even have wagered my honor on it, even my life if it came to it… and yet now I am not so sure.”

“Father…” Adamis tried to explain, but Laino interrupted him.

“What happened in my absence is profoundly grave, and the trust I always placed in you, my only son, is now in question.”

“Allow me to tell you what happened –”

“The facts speak for themselves, Adamis, Prince of the House of Eret. Your words of defense would neither change them nor justify them.”

“But they might explain…”

“Explain?” Laino repeated. He threw his head back and gave a long sigh. “How can you explain that in my absence, my heir shed Royal Blood of a rival House?”

“Let me make you understand…”

“What should I understand? That you were on the point of not only losing your own life, but of causing a war between the Houses?”

“Father, I can assure you that was never my intention. The events unfolded that way, but I was not the one who shed the first blood.”

“That is beside the point,” Laino said coldly. “What happened is unjustifiable, and worse still unforgivable. It should never have happened. You should never have let yourself get involved in a situation like that. I believed my son was bright enough, intelligent enough, skillful enough, to deal with difficult situations. I thought I had educated my heir well, that I had taught him to use his head either to avoid these situations or else to handle them. I believed he shared my vision, understood the values of our House, of our civilization, of everything that is at stake.”

Adamis closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. These words had opened up a hole in his heart.

“Who is the Regent of the House of Eret in the Lower Cycle, when the High King hibernates?”

“I am, as Prince Heir and by your will as High King.”

“And what is the Regent’s principal obligation?”

Adamis swallowed; his father was lecturing him as he had when he was a small boy, and the bitter unease in his stomach was rising to his mouth. If he would just let him explain … but he would not. His father had already made his decision, and no matter how much Adamis might try, nothing would make him change his mind.

“To secure the wellbeing of his House and protect it in the absence of the High King,” he said, reciting the sentence like a creed.

“And is that what you think you did?”

“I did what according to my judgment I considered to be best, given the situation I was faced with.”

“Best? Your judgment?” Laino shook his head. “Has my son lost his mind in this last cycle, while I was sleeping?”

“No, father, I have not lost my mind or my judgment.”

“You almost caused a war against the House of Aureb, a war which would have started had the cycle not ended.”

“Asu shed blood. I merely defended myself.”

Laino stroked the ancestral medallion on his chest, the sign which identified him as High King, and gave a long sigh. A whitish mist surged from his breath and expanded before him until it surrounded Adamis. On contact with the arcane mist he felt a deeply painful void, sharp, wounding, as if it were robbing him of his essence of life through the pores of his golden skin. He looked fearfully, at his father, not understanding. Why was his father draining his life from him? Could he be going to kill him? He turned an imploring gaze on his mother in the hope she would intervene, but she looked away.

“Are you going to shed blood, Adamis?” Laino asked in his distant, cold, almost threatening voice.

“No, my lord Father… of cour… not… I cou… nev… do it.”

“You will not? But if you do not defend yourself you will die…” The High King’s voice was icy now.

Adamis shook his head as he doubled over with pain. His father’s Power was consuming him. His body would not be able to withstand the touch of that lethal mist.

“Never… I will die if necessary… but I shall not raise my hand against my father.”

Laino nodded slowly. At a word the mist returned into his body through his mouth, as if a spirit which lived inside him were returning to its lair. Adamis shivered and shook himself in an attempt to rid himself of the feeling of death and pain that was torturing him.

“That ought to have been your answer. That ought to have been your course of action. Never to shed the blood of Asu. Do you understand?”

Adamis nodded, shuddering. “I understand.”

“I thought you had learnt that lesson long ago. The House, the Kingdom, comes before anything else. You have failed us all, your family, your House and me. And not just that: to my greater dishonor, I have had to use all my influence and leave myself in debt in order that you would not be condemned at the trial. And I assure you that you would have been if I had not intervened. High King Gar would have made sure of your death. Nothing would have pleased him more, leaving me between the sword and the wall. He nearly had me there, and I would have had to choose between your death or going to war against the other Houses. That is what was really at stake in that trial.”

“I am sorry, Father.”

“The political balance between the Houses is extremely fragile. It might break at any moment. The peace we enjoy is the result of the constant efforts of the High Kings, of alliances, of the game of power and of fear of the rival Houses. Whoever fails to play his cards well risks perishing. In a not-too-distant past there were seven Houses, and before that there were thirteen. Do you know what happened to those which are no longer with us?”

Adamis quoted the History of Alantres he had learnt as a child. “They were conquered. The High Kings, the Royal families and the court were executed.”

“True, but not completely exact. Notaplo?”

The Erudite raised his head and scratched his temple. “Not all were annihilated or annexed. One House was banished and another was disbanded; their members fled so as not to be executed. They are believed

to wander in distant places, hiding. For a long time they were hunted, but not anymore."

"The History of Alantres is both rich and bloodthirsty," Laino went on. "Never forget that. Do not drag your House to the abyss through your ineptitude, pride or vanity, for we would all perish with it. And believe me, nothing would make High King Gar and his son Asu happier."

"I understand, and I know what you mean, my King."

Laino rose, and as he did so an unnatural silence filled the chamber, muffling all sound. The ever-present mist on the floor intensified and Adamis felt its bleak touch on his legs. The High King advanced, looking straight ahead. As he did, the incredible Power his being gave off darkened everything behind him, as if night herself followed him as his escort. Adamis felt himself shiver in the face of his father's immense Power.

"But that is not what has affected me most in this whole situation," Laino said, and there was sadness in the distant murmur that was his voice. "What really worries me is what, although you denied it at the trial, we both know to be true."

"The Ceremony of Vivification," Adamis admitted. He knew that lying at that point would be useless. His father was too intelligent to let something like that escape him. Besides, Notaplo's presence and his worried face could only mean the Erudite had been interrogated first and already knew the truth of it all. Notaplo would never lie to the High King.

"It is preposterous. Why? I cannot understand it. Why would a Royal heir, Regent of one of the Five Houses, interfere with the most sacred of our ceremonies, that on which his own father's longevity depended? Why?"

At that moment his mother turned her head and looked at him questioningly. It was not a caring look, but a reproachful one.

"How could you do a thing like that?" the Queen asked, shaking her head.

"I only wanted to make sure the slave girl would not die. The ceremony was never defiled, nor were the High Kings in any danger at any moment, You have my word on that. I would never do a thing like that."

Notaplo intervened. "I can assure you the Prince's words are true. Only a speck of the girl's life essence was preserved, that is all."

The Queen put her hands to her face and rolled her eyes in disbelief. “That is treason all the same!”

Notaplo fell silent and lowered his head.

“For a slave…” said Laino. He gazed thoughtfully at Adamis. “I cannot understand it. You have always had a weakness for the slaves, ever since you were little. It is something for which I never judged you, even though it is frowned upon among us. Perhaps that is where I went wrong. Slaves are a necessary evil. They sustain our economy, they help our civilization advance towards its glorious goals. They are a source of wellbeing, of power for the Houses… We even have the possibility of experimenting on them and learning about their race, as Erudites like Notaplo do to further scientific developments. But do not misunderstand me, my son, they are and always will be slaves. They are inferior beings, without Power, primitive and wild. If we let them be, they would tear each other to pieces, like the animals they are.”

“Perhaps if you knew them you might discover they are not necessarily like that, that they are capable of great things, if they had the chance…”

“Your mother and I do not share your view. Neither does our House.”

“They are not so different from us, father…”

“Yes, they are indeed, and anyone who does not see that is a stain on our House. The Heir of the House of Eret cannot think this way. Slaves are a material good, a coin of exchange, and nothing more than that. So they have been for over a thousand years, and so they will be till the end of time.”

Adamis sighed deeply. *How I would like to make my father understand what I saw in Kyra, to have his eyes opened as she opened mine…* But he knew the High King would never listen. For him, as for the others, slaves were so many insignificant ants, to use and crush. That was the established order, and thus it would always be.

Laino turned to Notaplo, and the darkness followed him.

“You have always served my House well, Notaplo. You are one of the brightest minds of our whole glorious civilization. I will not blame you for what happened, since you simply followed your Prince’s wishes. But I must admonish you for not stopping Adamis from his reckless foolishness.”

“The slave, my lord, was special… I tested her myself…” Notaplo dared to say, almost in a whisper.

“She might have been ‘special’ for your experiments, for your scientific advances. But I can assure you she was not so for me, and I am life and death, law and judge in my own House.”

“Of course, High King. I beg your clemency and forgiveness for having strayed in my conduct. I allowed myself to be carried away by the hope that it might lead us to an important advance, toward eternal life.”

Hearing this, Laino became thoughtful. “I see… so that is your motivation in helping the Prince. How many times have you been close to a significant advance, old Erudite, and yet achieved nothing?”

Notaplo choked. “Well, you see, achieving new goals is extremely difficult … many times we think … many times we wish…”

“Many,” Laino interrupted him.

The Erudite nodded, ashamed.

“My beloved wife Belai says that my greatest virtue is that I do not let myself be carried away by my emotions, that my decisions are always well-thought–out, so that reason prevails over feeling. I can assure you that today I am finding it very hard. I would like nothing more than to make you suffer for the stupid, irreparable act you have committed.” He sighed heavily, and closed his eyes. For a long moment time seemed to stop, as if it was waiting for the High King to return from his deep thoughts. All watched in silence, motionless.

At last he opened his eyes, and time resumed its course. “I have meditated, and I shall honor that which I am, intelligence over emotion.” His gray eyes, now dulled, turned to Notaplo. “For service to me and to my House, and for your dedication and effort, I shall forget your part in this incident. But if you ever do anything remotely like it again, I shall order your public execution. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my High King.”

Laino turned to Adamis and pointed at him with an accusing finger.

“For the dishonor caused, I forbid you to have contact with the slaves again. You will behave like a worthy Royal Prince and stay away from them at all times. This is a Royal order. If you disobey it I will take your life myself. I shall use the King’s Slayer on you, put that dagger through your heart.” The threat of death was so real that the darkness generated by the Power of the High King arched over Adamis as if it sought to devour him.

Hurt, he bowed his head and knelt. “I will do my King’s bidding.”

“And now I shall tell you the punishment the court has charged me with applying to you.” Adamis readied himself for what he knew would be a harsh punishment, for his father had to save face before the other High Kings. “I, Laino, High King of the House of Eret, sentence you, Adamis, Prince Heir of my House, to exile for an indefinite period of time. You will go to the Secret Temple of Eret on the continent, supervise its construction and report on progress. You will take over your cousin Atasos’ functions there.”

The Queen let out a muffled cry and her face contracted. “Not exile…”

Adamis received the sentence as if he had been immersed head first in an icy lake. But he bit his lip and kept silent.

“That is my sentence. Let me hear you will obey.”

Adamis raised his eyes calmly to his father. “I accept it, and will comply.”

Chapter 13

Rapt, Liriana contemplated the ancient oak tree in the moonlight. The silver rays of Girlai, Father Moon, filtered between dark clouds which foretold the storm that was about to break. The tree was monumental, with sturdy branches reaching grandly towards the sky, fearless of the elements, with a deep-rooted integrity. In the center of the clearing the solitary tree looked like a gigantic wooden god.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” an old voice said behind her.

“It gives out strength,” she said without taking her eyes off the tree “It won’t let anybody or anything subdue it. It gives me a feeling of safety… I can’t explain it… but I feel it.”

“That’s right, my child. For more than a thousand years it’s stood here majestically, against men, Gods, heavens and storms, and it’s still here: robust, magnificent, noble, unbreakable.”

“More than a thousand years?” Liriana turned to seek Gedrel’s benevolent eyes in the darkness.

“Yes, my child, and it will still be here when I am gone, when you are gone, for there’s still a great deal of life left for it to enjoy. It’s the king of this beautiful grove, its protective spirit watches over it, although it suffers in silence, for part of its domains, of its children and brothers, are on the other side of the Boundary, and that forced, unnatural separation makes its soul weep.”

Liriana’s gaze lingered on Gedrel, the man she loved as a father. She studied his parchment face, his hair and beard as white as snow, and his leathery body which under his woolen robe was no more than skin and bone. She thanked Oxatsi, Mother Sea, for having blessed them with that good, wise man. She prayed that under her protection he might be kept away from the claws of the Gods and their Enforcers.

He put his open arms around the great tree. “This place, this powerful oak, represents our spirit, our soul. As long as it stands there will be hope for our people.”

Liriana caught the fresh scent of the forest mixed with the damp touch of the rain. She searched in the distance, trying to make out the barrier of the Gods, which rose no more than a hundred paces away from them and divided the forest in two. She was beginning to understand why Gedrel had chosen this place for this secret, profoundly important meeting. At first she had thought it was because the oak-wood was a hard place to reach, at the outer limits of the Sixth County and at the furthest point from the capital. It was a good place for a secret meeting: hidden, uninhabited, away from intrusive eyes. There was not a soul for several days’ journey around. But now, listening to her master and leader, she understood that it was something more, a spiritual place. She glanced around the oaks which surrounded them where the clearing ended, and the darkness behind them.

“Will they come?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. She was worried.

“We’ll soon find out,” Gedrel said, and winked at her.

“For the good of our people I hope their hearts will choose bravely.”

“So do I, child, so do I.”

A branch snapped under a boot. Someone was coming from the south. Startled, Liriana turned quickly, her hand at her sword. Between the trees there appeared a figure in dark robes, with a scarf covering mouth and nose, carrying something on his back. Liriana was preparing to attack when her heart began to beat like a drum. She had recognized his walk. *By Oxatsi!* she muttered as she recognized Maruk,

“How many times have I told you to give people warning?” she snapped, waving her arms furiously. “You’ll end up with an arrow in your stomach one of these days, and the worst thing is it’ll be one of our own!”

“Sorry, Liri,” Maruk said apologetically. “You know I don’t really take to all this military stuff of yours.” He shrugged as if it were nothing serious and came forward, carrying a heavy leather bag.

Liriana was about to reply, but when she saw him in front of her, tall, slim, strong-armed, with those seductive green eyes and the dark hair she so much liked to tangle, she could not. The words died in her mouth. Instead she turned to Gedrel.

“Why does he have to be here? He barely knows how to wield a weapon. It’s a risk. He can’t defend himself, and he’s putting us all in danger.”

“But he can wield his blacksmith’s hammer. And he can forge what no other Senoca can.” Gedrel pointed at his Ring. “That’s why he’s here. Maruk’s very important for us. He mustn’t fight, it’s true, he must survive, because he’s an open door to freedom. And more important, he symbolizes hope. That’s why he must be introduced to the others today, and he must show them there’s a way to salvation.”

Liriana shook her head in protest. She understood Gedrel’s motives and Maruk’s importance to the cause, but she did not want anything to happen to him. And she could not go on protecting him forever. That certainty gnawed at her insides.

Maruk raised his brows at each of them in turn. “I’ll go where he wants me to, and that’s that.”

Gedrel smiled. “Very well said, my young smith.”

Maruk raised Liriana’s hand to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers. “Don’t worry, my Captain. I’m always safe with you, and there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

“You’re impossible,” she said as she pulled her hand free. “If the Gods catch you again, I’ll let you rot in their catacombs.”

Maruk picked up the bag and kept walking, leaving Liriana behind.

“No you won’t, and that’s what really worries me.”

He walked on to the great oak, where a hole the size of a small shield had been dug. Around it, at a distance of several paces, seven blocks of wood had been placed as seats. Maruk knelt in front of the hole and put his hand inside. He checked it thoroughly, then opened his bag and tipped the contents into the hole. On his hand he put a coarse glove he had been carrying under his shirt, then from a small pouch at his belt he took out a silvery powder and spread it around the hole. He closed the pouch and hung it from his belt, and Liriana realized it was not the one he usually wore but a much wider one, like a sash of reinforced leather. From it hung more than a dozen pouches of different sizes, together with several metal tubes. *He’s brought all his ingredients. What’s he going to do?* she wondered as she

watched him working. He spent a long time over his preparations, mixing and pouring the contents of the pouches and tubes.

“Someday you’ll have to explain what all that’s for and what you’re doing.”

Maruk turned to her and smiled. “I’ll show you my secrets if you show me yours.”

Liriana rolled her eyes and muttered something rude.

Finally Maruk announced that he had finished. “Ready, Gedrel. Whenever you want.”

The old man looked up at the half-hidden moon between the clouds. “It’s almost time,” he said, and glanced at Liriana out of the corner of his eye.

“All right, but first let’s make sure we’re alone. Better safe than sorry.” She put her hands to her mouth and very carefully imitated the hoot of a barn owl. A moment later she repeated the call.

At first only the night breeze caressing the leaves of the oak broke the silence. Then a moment later a similar hoot came from the south, followed by another from the north. Liriana waited, her ears alert for the sounds she was expecting. The next call came from the east, then a shriller one from the west. She counted to thirty in her head and replied with a final, longer hoot.

“All the watchmen have reported,” she said to Gedrel. “The forest’s safe.”

“What would I do without you,” he said, and smiled. “Let’s begin then. May Mother Oxatsi protect us tonight.”

Maruk nodded and set fire to the piece of wood in his gloved hand. He threw it inside the hole he had been working on, stepped back and gestured to the other two to do the same. Suddenly a dazzlingly intense flare rose almost as high as the great oak behind it. Liriana threw her head back in surprise and covered her eyes. The flare, like a creature of fire savoring the night, remained upright for a long moment, filling the clearing with light and scorching heat. Finally it shrank until it was no more than a foot above the hole, producing an extraordinary heat.

Gedrel sat down on the wood block in the middle, with the great oak at his back. “Let’s wait, then. The fire will lead them to us.”

Liriana stood behind the old man, looking through the forest shadows toward the edge of the clearing, with her hand on the pommel of her sword. Maruk sprinkled something powdery on the fire so that it turned blue, then came to stand beside her. He gave her a mysterious smile.

Time went by, and she began to feel restless. They were risking too much by being there. If anything happened to Gedrel or Maruk, she would never forgive herself. *Everything'll be fine,* she told herself, trying to calm the storm in her stomach. *Trust Gedrel, he knows what he's doing.* Moving shadows made her eyes turn towards the east of the open area. The sound of footsteps reached her ears, and she could not help drawing her sword.

"Easy…" Gedrel said.

Three men appeared in the clearing from the forest. They stopped for a moment and watched the group by the fire from a distance. The leading man was as big as a mountain. Liriana swallowed. If she had to fight him, she would be in trouble. The other two were not so big, but they were solidly-built. The three had axes in their hands; the one the giant carried was enormous and two-headed. They came slowly towards the fire and stopped. She could see their faces now. These men did not belong to the Guard, and neither were they Hunters. They were slaves. She looked at the giant's Ring: he was a woodcutter.

Gedrel greeted him with a nod. "Welcome, Rutus of the Third County. I knew you'd be the first to arrive. I see you brought your cousins Usom and Turos."

The giant scratched his thick black beard under eyes of the same color. "You called and I came, master."

"I'm very pleased you answered my call," said Gedrel, and stood up. He hugged the woodsman, then his companions, and introduced Liriana and Maruk to the group.

Gedrel turned to the couple. "Rutus and his cousins are here to represent the Third County. We represent the capital. Please take a seat." Rutus sat down on one of the wood blocks, while his cousins stood behind him.

Rutus laid the huge axe across his legs and came straight to the point. "So what's the plan?"

Gedrel smiled. "You're always straightforward, Rutus. Let's wait for the others. We have a lot to discuss, and it's better if they can all be present."

Soon four men appeared from the south of the forest and came slowly towards them. From their appearance and their Rings, Liriana identified them as miners. They came as representatives of the Fourth County, where the great iron and coal mines of the region's mountain ranges provided the livelihood for most families. Gedrel welcomed them, hugging their leader Mitas warmly. He was a short, broad-shouldered man who looked as strong as an ox. Soon after, three men came from the west. Liriana had no trouble recognizing them by the smell of cattle and pigs which came before them. They were herders from the First County and they smelled frankly awful. She wished the storm would break to give them a wash, particularly Ganat their leader, who was as tall and thin as he was ill-smelling.

Gradually the rest of the guests of the secret meeting arrived. With Camptos, of the Sixth County, came three men. Seeing them, Liriana thought of Kyra and Ikai, who were farmers from the same county, as were most people in the poorest of the six Senoca regions. As she remembered this, Ikai's image came to her mind, and her stomach lurched. She felt a tremendous void as she remembered the Hunter, his courage and determination, his cool head in the face of danger, his strange eyes, the night they had shared… A turmoil of contradictory feelings assailed her, feelings she could neither control or quell. Unconsciously she looked at Maruk, as if to check that he had not noticed what she was feeling, when really it would have been impossible for him to have noticed. She shook her head in annoyance. *Leave me alone, Ikai, I've got enough problems as it is.* But she was aware that she could never get rid of those feelings, no matter how hard she tried; they were engraved in fire in her heart. *There are things the heart never forgets, however much you want it to.*

Camptos' group was followed by Costan's, of the Fifth County, also peasants from another of the poorest areas. Finally came Pasmal of the Second County, where there were more goatherds and shepherds than farmers.

Gedrel greeted everyone fondly as if they were members of his own family, which —Liriana realized— was practically true as far as the old man was concerned. He looked at each one as though weighing up an earlier decision, then nodded and cleared his throat.

"I see you here with me tonight, and I'm deeply proud. The pride of a Senoca father towards children who honor him. I'm aware it hasn't been

easy to answer my call, that you've had to cover your trail very carefully to get to this oak wood. I know you're risking your lives, that if the Guard or the Enforcers were to discover you they'd kill you on the spot. That's why the first thing I'm going to do tonight is thank you, my children, for the sacrifice you're making, and for the risk you're taking for the good of all the Senoca."

Mitas replied at once: "You've summoned us, master, and we've come. The danger's always with us, right from the day we decided to follow you and spread the message, each in our own County. We live with the fear, but it reminds us that we're alive, that we're fighting for the freedom which will come one day. And if we must die, we'll die gladly." As he spoke, he mopped his forehead in an attempt to wipe off the soot and mineral crystals stuck in the pores of his skin, which would never come off.

"Well said," grunted Rutus, slapping his axe with his huge hands. "I'm not much good with words, but I feel the same way."

Camptos put his hand on the sickle he carried at his waist. "If we're captured and killed, it'll be a glorious end to a sad existence. Better to die on our feet trying to find freedom than live on our knees as a slave till death."

"We were born slaves," Pasmal agreed, his hands on his shepherd's crook, "but that doesn't mean we should give up. We must fight so that our children's children can inherit a free land. If we must die for this, die we will, and we'll do it with our heads high."

Gedrel smiled broadly. His eyes gleamed. "Your words, my children, are music to my ears. Hearing you speak like this makes this old dreamer very happy. My philosophy of life, my beliefs, have sunk deep roots in your hearts. The message won't die with me. That's more than I could have wished for."

Costan stood up and showed them a pair of cracked, callused hands which had known nothing but hard work from sunrise to sunset. Looking at Gedrel, he said: "These are the hands of a slave farmer. All my life I've only known two truths: one, produce or die, and the second, eternal slavery. One day you came, master, you chose us, you showed us the dream and opened our eyes to something we'd never thought possible. You filled our hearts with hope. Now we look forward to a future of freedom. For that we thank you, master."

“This old visionary couldn’t be prouder. For more than twenty years I’ve traveled the counties searching for a group of adepts whom I could trust, to pass my dream on to them, my message of freedom. The way has been long, it’s taken time and effort to assemble this group, to create the web of trustworthy people behind each of you in your different counties. Now tell me, have you finished the preparations?”

Mitas spoke first. “In the mines, the important villages and in the capital of the Fourth County, my brothers have been working for months delivering the message. They do it carefully, patiently, avoiding risk. Once a week, at midnight, there are small secret meetings, always in a different place, always different groups. The message is told in whispers which are engraved in fire on the people’s hearts, in small groups, which are growing bigger day by day. We started out as a dozen, and in time that grew to a hundred. Now that hundred is a thousand, and still growing. Soon all the slaves of the Fourth County will have heard the message.”

“The same has been done in the Third County,” Rutus assured. “Some have been captured and tortured, others executed, for refusing to talk. But nothing can stop us.”

“Cattle travels to the capital from all the villages of the First County,” Ganat put in, “to be slaughtered and consumed. And with it goes the message.”

“The shepherds and their flocks travel from village to village in the Second County, and at each one they stop and deliver the message. At each well, fountain and drinking trough, the message is passed on.”

“Make this old man happy and recite the message you’ve given to the people. Recite it for me.”

Camptos began: *The unthinkable has come to pass: a group of Senoca has escaped from the Eternal City, outwitting the Gods in their own home. Seven are the Heroes who have seen the faces of the Gods and escaped from their Power.*

Mitas continued: *The Heroes can cross the Boundary. They can free the Senoca people from their Rings.*

Ganat joined them: *The Heroes have created a Shelter for the Senoca outside the Boundary, where they can live in freedom and safety beside Oxatsi, Mother Sea.*

Rutus and Costan added their voices: *A rebellion is brewing, led by the Heroes. The seed of subversion has been planted and grows strong. All the Senoca people must join the rebellion.*

Finally Pasmal joined them, and they ended as one: *There is hope for the Senoca. We must fight for freedom, must follow the Heroes to rebellion.*

Gedrel listened, eyes closed, nodding slowly, to the words he had written himself to lighten the hearts of the people and give them hope. The old man opened his eyes and looked up at the moon. “Then the effort was worth it, for the flame has caught, and soon the whole Senoca people will know there’s hope, that freedom is possible.”

“The message travels fast from Senoca to Senoca.” Mitas said. “The people want to believe, master. Deep in their hearts there still lives a permanent wish for a better life, in spite of all the suffering. But they’re afraid too, for that same suffering has taught them that their lives have no value for those who enslave them, that suffering, torture and death can come at any moment.”

“They’re afraid, and so they should be. What we’re doing is extremely dangerous. Simply talking about freedom is punished with death.”

“That’s why I doubt whether they’ll dare to rise,” Rutus said. “Talking about it in hiding is one thing, but acting against the Regent and the Enforcers of the Gods is a very different thing.”

“That’s natural,” Gedrel said sadly. “We’ve been slaves for more than a thousand years. We know nothing but submission, grief, pain and death. We have to use our heads. We can’t force our people, we must prepare the way. That’s why we’re here today, to ensure the Senoca will have a path to freedom.”

“And how will we prepare that path?” Mitas asked.

Gedrel heaved a deep sigh. “By example,” he said firmly. “The moment has come to take action, to rise, to begin the rebellion. You already know the consequences, and I won’t try to hide or soften them. Pain, suffering and death await us. Many of us won’t see the end of it, but it’s the price which has to be paid for freedom. Nobody will give it to us as a present. We have to take it by force.”

Gedrel’s words filled Liriana with pride.

Pasmal bent towards the old man. “If we act openly against the Regent, he’ll fall on us like a madman. All of us here can bear witness to his savage methods. We know what he’s capable of.”

“True, but don’t be mistaken, my pupils. He’s no madman. Far from it. He’s a sharp-witted, extremely intelligent man, which makes him all the more dangerous. You must understand the consequences of going on, my friends and brothers. Sesmok will get Lord Hunter Osvan to pursue us, and Osvan will send all his Hunters after us. He’ll send the Proxies and the Guard to search every village and every farm for traitors. All who are caught and jailed will suffer inhuman torture at the hands of the High Priest Torkem. Sesmok will want to end the rebellion before it even starts. That’s why he’ll search for us, us sitting here around the fire under this oak, and he’ll want to kill us.”

Rutus struck his chest with his fist. “I’m not afraid of Sesmok, or his Hunters, or his Guards. If they come for me I’ll die cleaving this axe in the chest of many of them. They’re men, and men bleed, all of them. But the Enforcers are something else… those monsters don’t bleed, not like us. Or at least, so they say.”

“And we have to fight them as well,” said Gedrel. “They won’t stay on the fringes.”

“The way you describe it, master, it sounds like pure madness,” Costan said. He sounded downcast. “We don’t stand a chance. They have Hunters, Guards, Eyes-of-the-Gods and Executors. We’re nothing more than farmers, woodcutters and miners. We don’t even know how to wield a weapon.”

Liriana saw true fear in the eyes of those men. What up till then had been something secret and dangerous was on the brink of turning into something much worse, and they were beginning to understand the magnitude of what lay ahead of them.

“You’re right,” Gedrel said. “It’s crazy. But crazy or not, we’re going to make it come true. We don’t have an army, but we have the people. We don’t have Proxies, Enforcers or Eyes, but we have men of worth who will lead us along: you who are here tonight. We don’t know how to wield a weapon, true enough, but we have the most powerful weapon of all: the heart of a downtrodden man who’ll fight for what’s just, to recover what was stolen from him, to reach freedom one day. It won’t be easy, and there’s nothing to say we’ll make it, but it’s our own fight, and we must rise to end

the tyranny. For us, for our children, for all our people, so that slavery comes to an end and we can live free and in peace in a better world."

"I'm ready, just waiting for the order," Liriana said with intense feeling.

"Me too," said Maruk. He stood up beside her.

Gedrel turned to them gratefully. "And there's something else we have, something of great worth. We have the Heroes of the Senoca, the ones who've already confronted the Gods, Enforcers and Men and come out victorious. Those whose deeds the message whispers to the people, those who represent hope."

Rutus scratched his beard. "Don't take me wrong, master, I'm not doubting your word, but have they really done what the message says, or is it just a poetic song to give the people something to dream about?"

"I appreciate your directness, Rutus. I don't want any of you here to have any doubt. The message is true, every word of it. Today two of the Heroes are here with us." He pointed to Liriana and Maruk. "Tell us the truth of what you went through."

Liriana came forward to the fire, which was burning with a blue intensity. Maruk went to stand on the other side of the flames.

"What I'm going to tell you," she said, "is what really happened. No fantasies, no exaggerations, just the truth, to let you understand what we're up against – but also what we were able to overcome."

She told the story of what had happened, and they listened mesmerized. At the end of her story there was silence as they came to terms with what they had heard.

"The Gods exist… they're real… powerful…" Mitas said, more to himself than to the others.

"Yes, but they aren't immortal. They can die. We know that now. And what's more, we've fought their Enforcers and killed them. It's possible. That's why you mustn't lose hope. We can fight, we can win." Liriana clenched her fist in front of her brightly-lit face.

"And the rest of the Heroes?" asked Camptos.

"They're in the Shelter, outside the Boundary. A safe place, where the Senoca already have a colony, beside Oxatsi, Mother Sea."

“How’s it possible to cross the Boundary?” Pasmal asked. “How did you do it?”

Maruk stepped forward. “I take care of that,” he said. He glanced at the old leader, who nodded. Maruk turned to Pasmal. “Come here,” he said. The man went over to Maruk, who told him to kneel facing the fire, beside him. Everybody looked on curiously.

Maruk took two tubes from his sash. Carefully he poured their contents into the fire. At contact with the flames they turned a blinding red and to everyone’s amazement, rose to the sky.

Liriana watched in fascination. Maruk’s arts always intrigued her, and his refusal to explain them made them more enigmatic still.

Maruk took Pasmal’s left hand and covered it with a thick glove which reached as far as his Ring.

“It’ll protect you. It’s got a fire-proof lining. I made it myself, and I’ve used it a lot. It works.”

Pasmal’s eyes were full of doubt, but he said nothing. From another bag which hung at his waist like a sword, Maruk took out another gauntlet and put it on his own right hand. It was the massive glove they all knew and hated: the gauntlet used by the Eyes in the Ritual of the Trade, when at the age of eight all Senoca were forced to have the Ring put on them. Maruk examined the silver gauntlet with its golden ornamentation and runes. He seemed to be checking that everything was in order. The artifact was solid, rectangular, very heavy and robust.

When it was ready Maruk nodded and looked Pasmal in the eye. “Don’t be afraid, everything’ll be all right. You’ll feel heat, like when you were given the Ring, but don’t resist, trust me.”

Pasmal stared at him with eyes full of dread, but nodded. Maruk closed his gauntlet over Pasmal’s Ring. Slowly, he moved the man’s arm until the flame enveloped the gauntlet covering the Ring. There were several muffled cries at the sight of the flames coming into contact with the gauntlet.

Pasmal began to scream with pain. The flame reached his hand and wrist just as it did Maruk’s. They were both protected by the gloves, but not sufficiently, judging by their faces.

“Hold on… a little more…” Maruk said with a grimace, holding his own and Pasmal’s hands in the flame. “It won’t be long…”

They suffered for a few more moments until finally a golden flash issued from Maruk's massive metal glove. The flash grew in intensity, blinding everyone, then went out.

Maruk withdrew their hands from the fire and they both moved back, enduring the pain as best they could. Maruk, whose gauntlet was still covering Pasmal's Ring, said: "It's almost done." Sweat was running down his forehead.

Pasmal's jaw was clenched, but he did not complain. He was staring tremulously at his left hand as if trying to assure himself that it was still there, that it had not melted. Maruk freed the gauntlet, and the Ring was revealed. With his other hand he brought out a small vial and poured a white liquid over Pasmal's Ring. Another powerful golden flash followed.

There was an awed silence.

"Let's see if it's worked," Gedrel said.

Maruk nodded.

The group went towards the Boundary, crossing the northern part of the oak wood, and stopped at the barrier of the Gods.

"Maruk…" said Gedrel, whose hand was shaking uncontrollably now that the barrier was so near.

Maruk led Pasmal to it. "Don't be afraid. Trust me. We can do it." He took him by the left hand, and they both crossed. There came a flash, and both men fell to the ground amid convulsions.

"Oh no!" cried Mitas.

"Easy," Liriana said. "This is normal. Anyone who crosses suffers the same effects."

They waited uneasily, watching the two men lying unconscious on the ground.

"Are you sure they're alive?" Rutus said. "They've been like that for a while."

And at that moment, Pasmal woke up. Shakily, he got to his feet and stared at them, wide-eyed.

"I've… crossed… I'm… alive. I can't believe it!"

A moment later Maruk woke up and got to his feet.

Gedrel smiled from ear to ear. “There’s your proof. We can cross the Boundary, we can escape and be a free people. We can fight the power of the Gods. Who’s with me? Who’ll rise to regain their freedom?”

There was a moment of disbelief, then a unanimous cry:

“Me!” they shouted with all the power of their lungs.

“For freedom! For the Senoca!” Gedrel cried.

“For freedom! For the Senoca!” they all shouted, raising their clenched fists to the sky.

Chapter 14

“Are you sure about this, Kyra?” Romen asked.

“Absolutely.”

He was looking at the Proxy of Issoli’s mansion, on the other side of the busy village square. “It doesn’t sound like a good idea to me,”

“Nobody’s making you follow me. You can go on your way right now.”

“This is crazy. You’re about to cross the village square, where everybody knows you and knows there’s a price on your head, to go into the house of one of Sesmok’s Proxies. In full day light! It’s insane!”

Kyra looked up at the morning sky, breathed in the air, which smelt of earth, and shrugged. “This is how things are. We came to the village by day, and I’m not going to wait around till night. It has to be now. Every moment we waste might mean the difference between life and death for my mother.”

Romen swore. “We won’t even make it across the square.”

“Stay here, I’ll go. If you don’t hear from me, you’ll know what’s happened. Go on your way, back to Liriana and the resistance.”

Romen put a hand on her shoulder. “Think again, please.”

“I’m not the sort of person who thinks again.”

And with that farewell she started off toward the mansion. She crossed the square with her chin high, without concealing her identity and without looking at anybody, her eyes fixed on her target. She went to the north side of the square, to the Proxy’s huge residence-tower. She could hear the whispers and muffled cries of her neighbors as they recognized her, but she ignored them and went on. Someone dropped a vase, which shattered, but she did not flinch. Two armed Guards were stationed at the door of the tower. When they saw her approach they went stiff as boards.

“Do you know who I am?” she said flatly, coming to stand in front of them as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Her right hand

was hidden behind her, with a throwing dagger at the ready.

“You’re… Kyra…” muttered the youngest of the guards. Kyra remembered seeing him in the village before. “You… were… Selected… but nobody returns after a Summoning…”

“I’m special,” she replied with a tight smile.

The other Guard, middle-aged, pointed his spear at her chest.

“The crazy rumors among the farmers say you’re one of the Heroes, that you and your brother are two of the seven Heroes…”

“Is that what they say? And what do you think?”

Grim-faced, he threatened her with his spear. “You don’t look like a Hero to me.”

“If you don’t take that spear away, you’re going to regret it.”

“Oh yeah? What are you going to do, Hero of the Senoca?”

Before he had finished speaking, her right arm shot out like a whip.

The Guard took a step back. He dropped his spear, then his shield, and put a hand to his right thigh, where Kyra’s dagger had buried itself deeply.

“Bitch…” he muttered, and bent over in pain.

Kyra prepared her other dagger. “You need to make a tourniquet, or else you’ll lose your leg.” She turned to the other Guard. “Can you announce me to your master Ambuk? I need an audience with him.”

The young man did not know what to do. First he raised his shield and readied his spear, then looked to his partner for advice.

“Do I have to ask again, or would you rather end up like him?”

The young Guard glanced at his wounded comrade, his eyes fearful. But the other man, bent double with pain against the wall and holding his leg, could not help him. So he nodded nervously and went into the building backwards, covering himself with his shield.

I have to risk it, it’s all or nothing, Kyra thought as she waited. *Time’s of the essence, and I’m running out of options.* Out of the corner of her eye she saw the villagers gathered in the square, not missing a thing. More than half the village was there, already. All activity had ceased, and nobody said a word. From the outskirts of the village more people were coming, drawn by the rumors which were flying through the streets.

The door of the mansion opened and three Guards came out. Their faces were stern.

“You can come in,” said the biggest as he stared at his wounded comrade. “But don’t you dare try anything, or it’ll be the last thing you do.”

Kyra went into the house as though she were a God, as though those Guards were nothing more than slaves she could cause to burst into flames by snapping her fingers. The thought reminded her of the God Prince Asu, and her stomach gave a lurch. *You bastard! One day I’ll tear your eyes out, even if it’s the last thing I ever do!* She took a deep breath and exhaled in a long sigh in an attempt to calm herself. The situation was complicated and she could not afford to get carried away. *I have to act like Ikai would, weigh up my options well and go on calmly. None of my wild impulses, or else I’ll never get out of here.*

In the inner courtyard of the house the Proxy was waiting for her. Behind him stood the young Guard from the door and two others. Added to the three behind her there were now six, which made fighting a bad idea: she would die. *Stay cool… don’t provoke them.…* She recognized the Proxy from Ikai’s description, and was grateful she had asked her brother to tell her every detail of his experiences when he had rescued her.

“Welcome, Kyra…” Ambuk started to say, then stopped. He stared at her with narrowed eyes and something like recognition in his face. “It’s… it’s amazing how alike you are…”

She came to stand before him in the middle of the room. “Alike?”

“You’re the spitting image of your mother… of Solma…”

“My brother Ikai told me you knew her… and my father…”

The strong guard interrupted. “Speak to the Proxy with appropriate respect.”

“I speak to the whole world the same way. Peasant or Proxy.”

Ambuk waved his hand. “It doesn’t matter.”

Kyra turned a look of hatred at the Guard, but bit her tongue and said nothing.

“Yes, I knew your parents… for a moment I went back in time, to those happy days of my youth… Forgive me, sometimes nostalgia gets the better

of me. It’s the years of solitude. Make sure you have someone beside you …” He gave her a kind smile.

Kyra nodded, looking closely at the Proxy. Just as Ikai had told her, she saw goodness in his face.

“Let me tell you that seeing you here today is something I never thought possible. Never before has one Summoned by the Gods come back. It’s something that nobody expected, and it’s created all kinds of rumors and gossip. It’s as if a ghost had returned in triumph from the dead.”

“Except that I’m very much alive.”

Ambuk smiled. “I can see that, and also that you’ve inherited your father’s fiery character. To be honest, I never believed your brother would make it. It’s a real accomplishment, to have managed to reach you and bring you back. Rightly do the people call you the Senoca Heroes.”

Kyra tensed. She had not expected the Proxy to be aware of that. It was not a good sign. He must have an order to capture her.

The Proxy was aware of her fear. “Don’t be afraid,” he said with a reassuring gesture. He turned to his Guards and ordered them to leave the two of them alone. There was a moment of tension, but they obeyed.

“I need to understand how all this is possible. I need to know whether the rumors are true, whether you managed to escape from the Eternal City, avoiding the Gods themselves, killing their Enforcers, that you can cross the Boundary and that there really is a Shelter. Is all this true, Kyra? Or is it no more than a hope, a slave people’s attempt to survive by inventing stories to avoid giving in to despair.”

“It’s all true. We’re no Heroes, but I can assure you that all the rest is absolutely true.”

Ambuk gestured towards the sofa. “Sit down, and please tell me everything … my heart needs to know whether there’s hope for our people.”

Kyra hesitated, she was not sure she could trust this man. After all, he was a Proxy of the Regent, an enemy.

“I understand that you don’t trust me. But I can assure you that I have no intention of handing you over either to Sesmok or the Enforcers, even though my orders are to capture the Seven Heroes, alive or dead.”

Kyra looked into his eyes. He seemed to be telling the truth, and Ikai had trusted him and had not been betrayed.

“All right,” she said.

She told him everything that had happened, to her and Ikai, and all the others. She told him hastily, but without leaving anything out. As the story unfolded Ambuk’s eyes widened. When she finished, he was obviously very touched, with his gaze lost in the distance, speechless.

She took hold of his arm, since he seemed about to fall. “Are you all right?”

For a moment he did not answer, as if he were in some faraway place he could not come back from. But he recovered.

“Yes… yes… I’m fine. What you’ve just told me changes everything. You don’t know how important this is, for the Senoca, for our future.”

“Why?”

“Because the flame of hope will take hold. Because we’ll be able to wake up from this abominable nightmare which has tormented us for a thousand years. Because not everything is lost, because there’s hope for the Senoca. What you have managed is an unthinkable feat.”

Kyra frowned in puzzlement.

“One day you’ll understand,” he told her.

She shrugged.

“And what’s one of the Heroes doing in my house? If you’ve come to me, risking your life, it’s because you need something from this Proxy. Something important. What is it?”

“My mother Solma is very sick. I need a Surgeon, the best, and I’m going to the capital to get him.”

Ambuk arched his brow. “You’re not thinking of going to see Miratos, Sesmok’s Surgeon, are you?”

“Not to see him, I’m going to kidnap him and bring him back to the Shelter.”

He gave a start. “That’s suicide. You won’t reach him. He’s one of the best-guarded men, and as cautious and wary as the Regent himself.”

“My brother wasn’t going to be able to get to the Eternal City either, and neither was I ever going to return from there. But we did, just as we’ll be able to save Solma.” She spoke with such assurance that Ambuk’s face changed from somber denial to awe.

“It’s true, you and your brother are truly amazing. I won’t try to dissuade you, but I must warn you it’ll be extremely difficult to kidnap Miratos. He lives next to the Palace, and is protected by Sesmok’s most trusted men.”

“I’ll find a way. Anything you can tell me that might come in handy?”

“He’s undoubtedly the best Surgeon in Osaen, but he’s also a man with a corrupt heart. He only uses his knowledge and experience in exchange for money and favors. He’s been Sesmok’s personal Surgeon for years, and he lives surrounded by luxury and vice. It’s rumored that he has many and varied vices, from very young girls to gambling and drugs. He can’t be bought, because he knows Sesmok will better any offer.”

“I see. A great man…”

“It’s curious how Nature bestows exceptional minds on evil men, and the two form an alliance. Sesmok himself, that viper, is extremely intelligent, which makes him a very dangerous man. You must avoid him at all costs, or else you’ll end up in a torture chamber.”

“I’ll remember. Thank you for the information.”

“Now that I come to think of it, I haven’t asked you the reason for your visit, and it must be something very serious to make you risk your life. How can I help you?”

Kyra stood up. “Time is short. I must reach the capital as soon as possible. I need two horses.”

“I see. They’re yours. Anything else?”

“Some provisions.”

Ambuk nodded. He called one of his servants and instructed him to prepare the provisions and two horses.

“What you’ve told me here today has changed my life. You’ve filled this broken heart with a new hope. I can never thank you enough. I thought I’d end my days alone and in the darkness of despair.” He took a step forward and hugged Kyra as if she were his own daughter. “Thank you, Kyra,

daughter of Siul and Solma of the Senoca. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Suddenly there came a loud noise from outside: a mixture of frightened voices and authoritarian ones.

Two of the Proxy’s Guards came hastily into the hall.

“Hunters, my lord, with the Guard of Osaen.”

Ambuk gave them a troubled look. “I haven’t been informed, and that’s customary. This is very strange.”

“They’re rounding people up in the main square. It doesn’t look like a courtesy visit, my lord.”

“It’s time for you to go, Kyra. Use the back door, into the garden and on to the stables.” He turned to his Guards. “Both of you, go with her. Make sure nothing happens to her and that she manages to get away from the village.”

“Thank you, Ambuk. I’ll never forget this.”

The Proxy winked at her. “Run, run, don’t let them catch you.”

Ambuk’s servant was waiting for them in the back garden. He handed Kyra the satchel with the provisions, and she leapt over the back fence and ran to the stables. The guards followed her closely: the one with the stern face and the young one who had been at the front door. The stable was near; they would reach it in a moment. The din which echoed in the square behind them was growing louder: cries of fear. Kyra dared a glance back and saw armed Guards preventing anybody from getting out.

A few paces from the stable, two men appeared out of the trees. Kyra stopped in her tracks. She recognized their clothes. *By Girlai, Hunters!* She looked for a way out. Behind her was the mansion-tower of the Proxy and the square, in front of her the stable and the two Hunters. To her right were trees and at the far end, the river.

“Who goes there?” one of the Hunters asked, raising his bow.

Kyra knew she had to improvise, to gain time somehow.

“A messenger from Proxy Ambuk, on official mission,” she lied with total ease. “I must get to the capital immediately” She indicated the two Guards behind her.

The two Hunters looked at each other briefly, then lowered their bows. The ruse was going to work! She walked on, head high, past the two Hunters, who did not take their eyes off her. She reached the stable and found half a dozen horses. *I just have to get on the first one and gallop away casually, without hurrying.* The two servants who were tending the horses came to the door when they saw her coming. They wore the livery of the Proxy's servants, and one of them was gigantic.

"She's one of the Heroes! Get her!" cried the strong Guard suddenly behind her.

Kyra closed her eyes and cursed to herself. *Damn traitor, son of a hyena!* She turned slowly and saw the Guard pointing his spear at her accusingly. The other, younger Guard did not know what to do. This went against Ambuk's orders, and he was totally confused. The two Hunters aimed their bows at Kyra.

"She's the one summoned by the Gods who escaped from the Eternal City!" the Guard shouted.

"Stay where you are!" one of the Hunters ordered.

She was trapped. She reached back, slowly, until she felt the dagger in her belt between her fingers.

"Grab her!" the Hunter ordered.

Suddenly there came a long whistle from the trees to her right. She recognized it at once. It was the deadly hiss of an arrow cutting through the air.

With a hollow thud the arrow buried itself in the back of the Hunter closest to her. He arched back in pain and fell to the floor.

"What the…!" the other Hunter cried. He sank to one knee and loosed two arrows towards the trees.

Kyra turned to the Guard when his spear was almost in her right eye. Instinctively she drew her head sideways, and the spear cut her right cheek. But she barely felt the pain. In an instinctive move her right arm rose and threw the dagger with tremendous strength. The Guard grunted and stepped back with the dagger embedded in his right armpit. He dropped the spear and protected himself with his shield.

"Kill her!" he cried to his partner.

The young Guard still did not know what to do. Kyra took advantage of his hesitation to reach for her two other throwing daggers, one for each hand.

“Skewer her!”

Kyra’s eyes met those of the Guard’s. She shook her head slowly. “Don’t do it. You’re too young to die like this.”

“Finish her off, I tell you!”

The young man made his decision. His spear searched for Kyra’s chest. She threw herself to one side and rolled on the ground. She got to one knee, aimed and threw her left hand dagger. The terrified Guard fell on his knees with it buried in his neck. He died choking on his own blood.

“Bitch!” the big Guard shouted. He brandished his sword and tried a savage cut to Kyra’s head. But she rolled again, landed on one knee and readied her hand to throw again.

“I’ll kill you!”

But she knew he would not. The wound in his armpit was lethal and he would bleed to death. He had not realized yet, although he would in just a few moments. She turned to the Hunter as he let fly another arrow.

There was a cry of pain beside the trees, and she made out a figure falling among the bushes. The Hunter grinned in triumph and nocked a new arrow, but this time it was aimed at Kyra.

“Don’t try anything. Lower that hand.”

Kyra obeyed.

He nodded towards the trees. “Who was helping you there?”

She shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. I hit him all right. Get on your knees, hands together, pointing up. Come on!” He threatened her with his bow.

In the circumstances, all she could do was obey.

“She’s… killed me…” stammered the Guard as he realized he was dying. He dropped his shield, fell to his knees and died.

The Hunter shook his head, and looked towards the stable.

“You two, stable-hands, come out.”

The two slaves peered out, reluctant to leave the safety of the stable.

“Come on now, stop hiding like rats. Take the rope from my partner’s belt and tie her hands and feet.”

The two stable boys did so, heads lowered. Kyra cursed her bad luck as they tied her wrists and ankles. She was left lying on her side.

The Hunter stood beside her, his bow pointed at her.

“So you’re the famous Hero who escaped from the Eternal City. I’m going to collect a handsome reward from the Regent.”

“I swear I’ll tear out your eyes for this!” Kyra threatened furiously.

The Hunter laughed. “I very much doubt it.”

Suddenly his laughter turned to a guttural sound. His bow fell to the ground, and he put his hands to his throat. A knife had pierced it from the back of his neck to his Adam’s apple. He fell and died with a gurgle of blood, his face beside Kyra’s on the ground.

“Could you tell me why you killed him?” the slimmer of the two stable-boys asked his comrade, who was retrieving his knife.

“He said she’s one of the Heroes, Karm. We’re looking for the heroes.”

“I know, Honus, but you could have talked to me before killing a bloody Hunter!”

The giant shrugged. “There wasn’t time. What was I supposed to do? They just appeared here, right where we were hiding. It’s just my bad luck! Always the same story! What can I have done to offend Oxatsi?”

“Honus, stop complaining!”

Kyra stared at the two men, unable to puzzle out what was happening.

“Could someone tell me who the hell you are?” she burst out furiously.

The two men turned to her.

“My name is Karm, and this grumbling giant is Honus. We were looking for you… well, for the Heroes…”

“You have to help me, quickly,” Kyra said with a nod towards the trees. “My partner might be badly wounded. I have to get to him,”

“No time for that,” Honus said. “If we don’t hide at once, they’ll catch us all!” He gestured at the square with his huge hand.

“You’re right,” Karm said. “Let’s clean up this mess, quick!”

A little later, her hands still tied, Kyra entered the stable on the giant's shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"For the sake of all the Seas, let me down!" she protested. "I have to go for Romen!"

"As you wish," Honus said. He dropped her on top of the bodies they had hidden among the hay.

"You brute!"

Karm put a finger to his lips. "You'd better be quiet. More Guards are coming."

"If we get out of this, you'll learn a thing or two," Kyra protested as Honus spread hay over her to hide her. "I swear you'll have something to remember me by!"

"If we get out…" said Karm, and hid himself hastily.

Chapter 15

Adamis's eyes lingered on the ship which would take him into exile at dawn. It was a light, fast vessel with a single sail, that would carry him over the ocean far from his home for an indefinite period of time. Palace servants were decorating her as though for some solemn royal funeral. Along the main avenue which led to the docks a number of Oppressors, whips in hands, oversaw the groups of slaves who were cleaning and decorating the streets. This was in preparation for the crowds who would come to witness the departure of the Prince of the House of Eret the following day.

He raised his eyes and scanned the horizon. The sun was already sinking in the sea to rest until the new dawn, and took its farewell by painting the sky a warm orange. *My father wants to make my expulsion into an eye-catching spectacle. The whole kingdom will come down to the docks to say farewell to their Prince, doomed to exile.* He shook his head. He could understand why. His father always thought out each move before making it, and this was nothing more than a well-calculated political maneuver. They would all witness the great show: the tears of his mother the Queen, the sorrow in the face of his father the High King, the displeasure of the nobility, the annoyance of the other castes. Everything well-orchestrated and in full view of the other great Houses. *He has thought it out carefully. It is a good move, and it saves his face before the other High Kings; it shows him off to advantage, punishing his only child as he promised he would. There's no doubt he is both intelligent and extremely astute. That is why we are the most powerful House, and my father will make sure we continue to be so, despite my blunders.*

"A beautiful ship," Teslo said behind him.

His Champion was followed by six Custodians of Honor. The Prince could not take a step without being followed by the Guard, on his father's orders.

He nodded. "Have you ever sailed, Teslo?"

“Yes. It is part of my training as a soldier. But never beyond the boundaries of the Five Rings.”

“Have you never left Alantres?”

“No, my lord.”

“There is a whole world out there,” said Adamis with a smile, “even though our people refuse to acknowledge it.”

“I know the geography of the known world.”

“Looking at maps and the archives of knowledge is not the same as treading the fresh grass of the east of the great continent. Nor smelling the sweet scents of spring in the pastures, or hearing the call of the white eagle as it climbs the skies. Those are fascinating things our fellow countrymen will never experience.”

“Even less live, I imagine…”

Adamis winked at him. “Indeed, much less…” and he smiled.

A slave approached the Custodians and remained prostrate a few paces away. “Go back to your duties, slave,” Teslo ordered her.

But she did not move. She laid her head on the ground and raised her left arm, showing her Ring.

“I said…”

But Adamis interrupted him with a gesture.

Teslo stiffened, and his eyes filled with alarm. “My lord Prince, remember your father’s prohibition. I will deal with this trouble.”

“I have not broken my father’s law. I am keeping away from the slaves. This one is several paces away, and I am not touching her. Check her Ring.”

“Yes, my Prince.”

Teslo made his way between the Custodians.

Adamis watched her in puzzlement. There was nothing special about her; she wore a faded brown robe, with an almost transparent white scarf on her head. She was young, and looked well fed.

The huge warrior reached the young woman and eclipsed her with his own body, then grasped her outstretched arm to check her Ring.

“She is a messenger, my lord. She has a Hare engraved on her Ring.”

Without raising her head, the slave girl held out her right hand. In it she carried a silver box. Teslo placed his great hand beneath the girl's, and she dropped the box into his palm. She nodded in acknowledgment, stood up and left.

"Bring it to me," Adamis said.

Teslo turned back with a frown. "She was carrying this box. I have looked it all over and it seems harmless. I do not sense Power in it either, although perhaps it would be better if a Custodian opened it. It might be dangerous."

Teslo's sudden concern reminded Adamis of something he must bear in mind: they were in the midst of the Higher Cycle. This meant that the five High Kings were in power again, and thus the game of politics and treason, two things which always went hand in hand, became highly dangerous, even lethal. The power-play for supremacy would reach unthinkable levels presently, and all precautions would be inadequate. *I myself, with my exile, am the first victim of this cursed game of fools.*

The box was completely smooth, with no sign to reveal who it might belong to, which did not surprise him. He closed his eyes and focused, then summoned his Power and studied it. He could not perceive a trace of any presence, but there was something more worrying: there was a tiny trace of essence of latent Power inside the box. Teslo had not been able to sense its presence, since his sensitivity to the Power was far less developed. He was a soldier, and that was what his Power had specialized in from childhood. Luckily Adamis had spent most of his life among Erudites and had had the privilege of working his Power in a range of fields, although always within the limits imposed on him by his basic element: Ether.

The box opened with a click. Inside he found a pearl. There was nothing else.

"A pearl… truly strange…" he murmured. He held it between his fingers and became aware that there was power in it.

Teslo frowned. "There is no message," he said.

"That intrigues me. What is a slave doing delivering an anonymous message to the Heir Prince of the House of the First Ring?"

Teslo shrugged his enormous shoulders.

"We'll have to find out," Adamis said.

Night had fallen by the time he returned to his royal suite after dining with his mother Belai. All the love she had been unable to show in his father's presence she had given him on that last evening. Adamis knew perfectly well that his mother doted on him, even though they did not always share the same views. Like his father Laino, his mother defended the old teachings and was never likely to change. But she loved him; of that he had no doubt.

Once in his rooms, he closed the door behind him. Two Custodians remained on guard outside. He went over to the balcony and drew the thick curtains to guarantee the privacy he wanted. He sat on the bed, brought out the pearl and stared at it for some time.

It has a tiny speck of power in it. I can feel it, as if it were alive. If I activate it, it might be dangerous, but if I do not, I shall never get to the bottom of all this. In fact, he was puzzled by it. His people rarely imbued an object with Power, as the mere act involved a measurable cost in Power, higher than what might be transferred into the object. As a result, it consumed life and hence was inefficient. The practice had long been abandoned, although in olden times it had been used. *Nowadays we have discs specially alloyed for this purpose. And yet it is still a process which consumes power, although it is far more efficient. So we must decide when and if it is worthwhile.* The more he thought about it the more intrigued he became, and at last he came to a decision. *I am going to activate it. I need to understand what is going on.*

He put the pearl in the middle of the bed and moved back a few steps. He summoned his Power and raised a protective sphere of ethereal energy around his body. *Better safe than sorry.* He concentrated, then stretched out his hand to cause a thread of power to issue from his index finger. He directed it gently until it touched the pearl. When energy and object came into contact, there came a sudden soft gleam and the pearl became activated. Adamis watched an image being projected from it, taking shape before his eyes. The image was weak, with barely any noticeable color, so that it was hard to make anything out. He narrowed his eyes in an attempt to get a better sense of the figure which had formed. Gradually his eyes

managed to make sense of the weak gray tones. He was looking at a golden woman, apparently young, but he could not see who she was, since over her nose and mouth she wore a mask in the shape of a tree. Its roots covered her mouth, the trunk her nose and the thick branches her eyes.

Uncertainly, he stepped forward to come closer to the image and try to see who it might be, or at least what the purpose of that strange visual message might be. At the same moment the image vibrated and emitted a sound like a shrill shriek. Startled, Adamis stepped back. But nothing happened. Once again he moved toward the pearl, and the image vibrated once more with that same shrill shriek.

This is something out of the ordinary, he thought. *That sound is not natural… it seems to be something created on purpose, with a definite aim… Yes, it is definitely artificial. But why does it not reach me clearly?* And then he realized. *My barrier!* It was not reaching him because the sound had an element of Power in it, and the protective sphere would not let anything with Power cross it. *And what do I do now? Should I take the risk? The sensible thing to do would be to call Teslo and the Custodians. There is no reason to make it worth exposing myself, least of all now, when enemies are lurking. This might very well be a trap.* But the woman intrigued him. *I know I ought not, but I am going to. I hope I am not making a mistake.* He lowered the protection of the sphere and stepped forward, ready to jump back.

The image vibrated.

A mental message reached him.

Adamis, Temple of the West, midnight. It is important. Come alone.

The mental communication reached him with absolute clarity and left him utterly bewildered.

He opened the bedroom door and addressed the Custodians on duty.

“Call Notaplo the Erudite and Teslo. Tell them to come at once.”

Teslo arrived in the blink of an eye, stern-faced, his eyes searching for any danger. Notaplo took a little longer. Adamis invited Teslo to approach the image on the bed. When the sound came, he could not help a smile.

“Did you get the mental message?”

“No, my lord. I only heard that annoying noise.”

Notaplo smiled. He was beginning to understand what was happening.

“Let this old scholar try.”

Adamis waved his hand. “Go ahead.”

Notaplo moved forward, and the incomprehensible sound came once again.

The Erudite scratched his head. “Curious and puzzling.”

“More so than you think,” Adamis said. He moved toward the object and the image vibrated.

Adamis, Temple of the West, midnight. It is important. Come alone.

He turned to both of them. “Did you receive the mental message?”

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“No, my lord,” Teslo said, confirming what Adamis suspected.

“It is a coded message, for my ears alone,” he explained.

Notaplo’s eyes opened wide. The spark of curiosity gleamed in them. “If that is so, it has been done by someone with a great deal of Power. More than that, someone with a great deal of knowledge… Hmm… it is several millennia since the Erudites of the Houses stopped casting spells on objects, imbuing them with Power. That practice was discarded with the discovery of the Diamond Discs. Whoever has sent you this object, my Prince, is an expert in arts which are practically extinct among us.”

Adamis scratched his chin. “Which only increases my curiosity.”

“What is the message, my lord, if I may be permitted to ask?”

“It says: *Adamis, Temple of the West, midnight. It is important. Come alone*.”

“You are not thinking of going, are you, my Prince?” Teslo hastened to ask. “It is a trap, it must be.”

Adamis was silent as he considered what to do.

Notaplo went over to the image and examined it with the greatest care. His old eyes read every line of that enigmatic woman’s face.

“Teslo is right,” he said when he had finished. “I fear you are in danger, my Prince. You must be careful.”

Adamis smiled calmly. “Do not worry. That is something I shall certainly be.”

Chapter 16

Liriana stood waiting in the middle of the road which crossed the great beech forest. She looked into the distance, but could only see a couple of squirrels leaping from branch to branch and a skittish deer running into the depths of the underbrush. From all directions, she could hear the incessant tweeting of hungry fledglings calling their parents as they flew over the forest in search of food.

She bent her head to avoid the sunbeams which penetrated the foliage and wrapped the old hooded cloak around her. Her hands were sweaty, and she rubbed them on her tunic to dry. The armor she wore under her cloak and the weight of the concealed weapons hanging from her belt made her hot. Or perhaps she was more nervous than she thought. The tip of her leather boot tapped the ground of its own volition. *I'm nervous all right. I'd better try and calm down. There's a lot at* stake. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, emptying her lungs. She felt better, more at peace, and repeated the exercise.

A distant sound reached her on the gentle breeze which came from the road. She strained her hearing and identified the sound: horses' hooves and military boots. *Here they come. The information our spies brought us was correct.* It was not long before she saw several riders, the advance guard of the group, approaching at an easy pace. They were led by a Captain of the Guard, and a Proxy in his characteristic blue and white robe. But that was not what she needed to see. She waited for them to get closer, forcing herself to stay calm, until she saw a long line of large carts with canvas coverings, pulled by Percheron horses. *There they are!* she thought with a sigh of relief. The carts were escorted by two score soldiers of the Guard, half of them on either side, in a long line. She could not see the end of the huge convoy which disappeared into the forest, but she calculated there would be another score in the rearguard.

“Some sixty soldiers in all, counting those at the front…” she muttered. It was what she had expected. She knew the Guards’ method perfectly.

For the rebellion! For freedom! she said to herself, to raise her spirits. She clenched her fists tightly under the cloak and stayed where she was, unmoving.

She let out a long sigh, releasing all her tension and anxiety, and stood up to face the riders.

The Captain of the Guard stopped his black courser and raised his arm to signal the column to stop. Brown eyes gleamed from under the plumed helmet. The look he gave Liriana was clearly one of annoyance.

“Move over, you halfwit!”

One of the riders behind the Captain readied his spear and shield. “How dare you interrupt the Guard’s progress?” he called out.

Liriana’s reply was deliberately casual. “Why should I? I was here first.”

“Have you lost your mind?” the Captain demanded angrily.

The Proxy brought his white mare forward to the officer’s side, and the armed riders came with him.

“What’s the problem?” he said. “We can’t waste more time, we’re late already. The Eyes are waiting, and you know they don’t understand anything about delays …”

“I would say you’ve got about a hundred carts with you,” Liriana observed.

“And what’s that to you?” the Proxy said disdainfully.

“It must be the Cereals Quota. Are you taking it to Urasis, the capital of the County?”

The Captain and the Proxy exchanged suspicious glances.

“You’re well-informed,” the Proxy said distrustfully. “I’m Proxy Alius, in charge of the Cereal Quota of the Third County, and this is Masium, Captain of the Guard of Urasis. Who are you?”

“Me? Oh, I’m nobody important. I don’t have a title. I’m just a Senoca slave, like you, like all of us.”

“You look more like a Pariah who’s lost her wits,” Masium said. He flipped his cloak back and drew his sword.

Liriana pushed back her hood and revealed her face. Lazily, she let her cloak fall to the ground. Masium was astonished to see she wore officer's armor and blue and white tunic underneath it.

"What's this? That's a Guard Captain's uniform and insignia you're wearing!"

"I was one a long time ago, just as you are. But now I serve another cause, a much nobler and more important one."

"Get out of our way this minute, Pariah, Captain, fool or whatever you are," Alius snapped out, "or it'll mean your life. I won't allow any more delays."

"Oh, I see. You must run to bring your masters, the Enforcers of the Gods, the fruits of your people's labor, while the victims of your robbery die of hunger."

"You're a fool. I serve Regent Sesmok and I obey the Law of the Gods. You'll pay with your life for this insult. Masium, get rid of her!"

The Captain gave her a final glance, as if he did not quite see the meaning of all this. What was this lunatic doing in the middle of the road, confronting the Guard?

Liriana remained firm, her face calm, her hands by her weapons.

Masium shook his head and came to a decision. "Kill her!" he ordered.

The first two riders spurred their mounts and charged. Liriana drew sword and dagger and took two steps back. The first soldier aimed his spear at her heart, and she took two more steps back. Suddenly three whistles sounded sharply. She got ready to deflect the spear, but it never reached her. The soldier fell from his horse with three arrows in his body. He writhed on the ground, moaning, while his horse ran off along the road. With a bitter groan, he died.

"By the Gods!" Masium cried.

The second rider reached Liriana at a gallop and tried to skewer her with his spear. Swiftly she threw her body sideways and the spear brushed her face. Her stomach lurched. *Almost!* The soldier passed at full speed. He pulled hard on the reins, and as he began to turn to face her again, a dozen arrows came from between the trees and pierced his body. He fell to one side.

“Ambush!” cried Masium.

Proxy Alius hunched down on his mare’s neck. In his eyes was bewilderment and disbelief. How could anyone dare to attack them. “It’s impossible! This can’t be happening!” he cried.

“Everybody to arms!” Masium yelled to the rearguard. “Pass on the order!”

Liriana raised her sword and dagger and crossed them above her head. At her signal there came a mighty roar from among the beeches. Other shouts of fury joined in all along the road, growing in strength until they were like thunder. Hundreds of throats shouted in unison.

And the din came to life as hundreds of men fell on the column, as though two waves of death had closed in over the soldiers. From both sides of the road they came, as if the forest were sending its sons with axes in their hands, possessed by the wrath born of a thousand years of slavery and suffering.

The giant Rutus appeared at Liriana’s side with his great two-headed axe raised above his head, yelling like a madman. Behind him came his two cousins Usom and Turos, carrying woodcutters’ axes and hunting knives.

“It’s time to fight for freedom! Today we’ll spill the blood of the traitors to obtain it!” Liriana shouted, and joined the fray.

In the blink of an eye the attack turned into a bloodbath. The woodcutters attacked the soldiers to right and left with their axes, making up for their limited fighting experience with courage and strength. They struck out furiously, with powerful arms used to hard work and sustained effort: robust bodies, men who had spent their whole lives in the mountains felling and dragging trees to fulfill the wood quotas imposed by the Gods. They wore no armor, only the old cloth tunics and tanned leather pants they wore daily as they worked in the forests. The soldiers of the Guard on the other hand had years of experience and military training. They wore helmets, reinforced leather armor over body and limbs and the blue-and-white uniform of the Guard with its blue cloak. They were armed with spears and round wooden shields and were skilled with them. But the attack had caught them off guard. Never in their lives could they have imagined anything like this happening. The most they had faced were skirmishes against some band of outlaws larger than usual, or more bloodthirsty and

daring. Never anything on this scale. There were hundreds of woodcutters, and they were attacking all at once. An organized attack, by slaves: it was something unthinkable, something which had never happened in a thousand years.

The road was soon patched with red. All along the line of carts the soldiers of the Guard fell, amid a deafening, terrifying uproar. But at the rearguard and at several points along the line of carts the Guard managed to regroup. With military efficiency, they formed a line and began to deliver death to the assailants, spearing them from behind the protection of their shields.

Rutus reached one of the head riders and with a terrifying yell struck the soldier's shield with his huge axe. The shield broke in two and the axe penetrated wood, armor, flesh and bone. The rider stared, wide-eyed, at the steel that had killed him and toppled from his horse. Usom and Turos meanwhile were attacking other horsemen on both sides, delivering tremendous blows with their axes.

When Liriana reached Masium and Proxy Alius she found them both fighting desperately on horseback beside two other riders of the Guard. The bodies of more than twenty good honest men lay around them.

"Surrender, for the sake of your lives," Liriana called out.

Alius's tunic was splattered with blood and there was a cut on his forehead. He glared at her.

"If we surrender, there'll be something worse than death waiting for us. Regent Sesmok will skin us alive."

"Or turn us over to the Eyes," Masium added. "And that will mean an even worse fate."

There was a moment of tension, and the fighting around the group stopped. The woodcutters stepped back hesitantly when they saw Liriana talking to the leaders of the convoy.

Rutus came to stand grimly at Liriana's right. "Let me kill them," he said, laconic as always.

Turos came to stand on her left, axe in one hand and knife in the other. "Today we're not woodcutters of the Third County, today we're freedom fighters. Give the order, and we'll finish them off."

Liriana looked at both men with a pride she had never known before. She was proud to be fighting alongside them, proud of their union and strength, of their sacrifice, of that fight for freedom.

She turned to the enemy. “Surrender and we’ll spare your lives. Dying for a Regent who exploits his people for his own profit, who serves the wishes of a bunch of despotic Gods who enslave us, is a bad way to die.”

Alius shook his head dismissively. “You’re crazy if you think you’ll get anywhere by this. You’ll only gain more suffering for everybody in the County. The Regent will make you pay dearly for this affront. He won’t tolerate anyone standing up against him, least of all a few miserable woodcutters led by a slip of a girl. He’ll hang you all after making you suffer unending torture.”

Liriana turned to Masium enquiringly.

The Captain sighed. “I’m an officer of the Guard. It’s all I am and all I’ll ever be. I won’t risk my family’s life. If I betray Sesmok he’ll kill all my people in Urasis: my wife, my children … My mission is to escort the Quota to the capital and deliver it to the Enforcers, and that’s what I’ll do.”

Liriana shook her head. “I’m sorry to hear that. Those who serve the Regent, those who serve the Enforcers, are our enemies. And our enemies will suffer just as the people do.” She turned to Rutus, then to his cousins. Crossing her sword and dagger above her head she gave the order:

“Kill them!”

Fighting broke out again. When one of the riders killed a woodcutter, Rutus delivered a massive blow which toppled both rider and horse.

Liriana made her way to Masium, who had been thrown off his mount and was now fighting on foot with sword and dagger.

“Leave him to me,” she told the three men who were fighting him. She did it more to spare their lives, since she was sure Masium would kill them easily. They were no match for his skills. But she herself was. The Captain turned his attention to her and saluted her with his sword. She returned the salute. They sized each other up, delivering swift strokes as they circled one another. Both blocked the attacks easily. Liriana decided to assess her opponent’s dexterity, and attacked fiercely. Masium blocked and followed with a quick, balanced counterattack. *He’s good. I’ll have to be very careful.*

Then it was Masium's turn to attack with a feint, but Liriana saw the stroke coming and avoided it by leaping out of reach of the sword.

A muffled scream behind Masium caught her attention. Rutus had just finished off the last rider of the vanguard with an axe-stroke which clove both helmet and skull.

The woodcutters assembled around Liriana and Masium to watch the fight as though it were a fencing competition. In fact, that was exactly what it was, except that this was a fight to the death. Masium attacked masterfully, and Liriana was only just able to block him with sword and dagger. She was beginning to think he was too good for her, and she started to feel nervous. Then she saw the hopeful faces of the poor wretches who had followed her into battle. Men who had never in their lives shed blood, who had fought with all their might, without preparation, without knowing how to use a weapon to kill. *I can't fail them. I have to be an example, to give them hope. They must know we can win, that we'll win in the end. And that's why I must win this first battle. If he kills me they'll lose courage, they'll lose hope.*

She aimed to distract Masium. "Are you going to let a woman beat you in combat?" she taunted him.

"Nobody's ever defeated me in combat, neither man nor woman. I've been Champion of Urasis for three years in a row."

Damn! Why couldn't he have turned out to be a drunk or a coward? I had to choose the Champion of the Third County!

"Champion? They must hand out the title for free in this County. All I can see is a soldier who's a bit clumsy with his sword."

Masium looked at her for a moment, trying to guess her intention. "Well, today you'll die in front all these people," he said, "at the hands of this clumsy soldier."

He lunged with surprising vigor. Liriana blocked the sword, deflected the dagger and dodged him, but received a cut in the forearm in the process. She stepped back a few paces, out of his reach.

She raised her eyes to see Turos taking a prodigious leap, letting out a howl as he did so, and throwing Alius off his horse. The Proxy got to his feet, sword in hand, stunned. He focused on Turos, who was getting back to his feet and retrieving his axe. Alius turned and found he was surrounded

by woodcutters with grim faces and blood-spattered bodies. They were coming to kill him.

“You’ll all die for this!” he yelled at the top of his voice.

A dozen axes fell on his body and hacked him to pieces.

Liriana sighed. It was time to bring it to an end. She had to win, and so she would, for their sake. It would not be pretty, but it would be a victory. She had learnt many things during her time in the Guard, and one was how to fight dirty if necessary. She stepped forward, crossed sword and dagger in front of her face and chest and went for Masium. Taken by surprise, he launched a wide sweep at her unprotected thigh. It was the logical move, and she was expecting it. She blocked it with a downward stroke of her sword. Masium’s dagger, lightning-fast, searched for her neck, and she crouched with the agility of a cat. The dagger cut her temple and very nearly finished her off. She plunged her own dagger up to the hilt in his boot, then rolled over to one side. The Captain’s sword reached her in the shoulder, but the padding of the armor held. She got up and saw the expression of pain on his face as he choked back a scream. His foot was nailed to the ground by the dagger. She raised her sword and advanced. Masium lunged to keep her at bay, but the pain when he leaned his weight on the wounded foot made him grunt out a curse. She moved round in a circle, and the officer knew he was lost. Turning his foot was pure agony. Desperately he held his own dagger by the tip, raised his arm and threw it at her, but it was a weak throw, and it did not hit her. He bent over to pull the dagger in his foot out, but Liriana leapt forward and slashed his arm.

She waved her sword at him. “No, no,” she said.

Masium breathed deeply. His eyes fell on the woodcutters who stood around him in tense silence. He realized everything was lost.

“Will you give me a fair death?”

“I will,” Liriana said, and saluted him. “You have my word.”

Masium nodded and let his sword fall.

She stood in front of him and placed her own on the officer’s shoulder.

“Good luck,” Masium said, and closed his eyes. “You’re going to need it.”

She drew the sword back, then with a powerful stroke she decapitated him. The head fell to the ground and rolled to her feet.

The men stared in astonishment. After a moment, they began to shout their leader’s name.

“Liriana! Liriana!”

The clamor spread all along the column, and soon everybody was chanting her name. The whole forest seemed to be shouting it to the heavens.

“Liriana!”

The young woman staunched the blood which was flowing from the cut on her temple. *That was close*, she thought. *Very, very close*. Then she looked at the exultant men who were shouting her name to the skies.

“Today is a great day, the day of our rebellion!”

She raised her sword to the sky and cried:

“For freedom!”

Chapter 17

“Come on, Ikai, hurry up, you move like an old lady,” Albana said, teasing him with her smile, which was as charming as it was sarcastic. She was crouching at the top of the hill watching him. She had been waiting for them for some time.

“I’m nearly there…” was all he could say. He was exhausted. His legs were barely responding and in agony, his lungs burning from the effort and the altitude.

“How… how can it be that this woman… never gets tired?” Isaz complained. He was panting as he climbed the steep slope behind Ikai.

“I don’t know,” Ikai said, “but she’s making us both a laughing-stock.” He reached the top and offered his comrade a helping hand.

“Yes, she is,” Isaz agreed. With Ikai’s aid he reached the summit.

Ikai, bent double, hands holding his sides, barely able to breathe, looked for the brunette. She had already disappeared again.

“That girl isn’t normal,” Isaz whispered. He sat down on the ground to get his breath back. “It’s been more than three weeks of forced march since we left the Shelter. We barely stop to rest at night, I’m knackered, my body is on the verge of collapse, and I’m an experienced tracker, used to mountains and long marches. You used to be a Hunter. Nobody’s better prepared than us, and still she leaves us behind as if we were just kids. She’s not normal, I’m telling you.”

“I know, my friend. She’s surprising in many ways.”

“Where did you say you met her?”

“It’s a long story, but rest assured, you can trust her.”

Isaz bowed his head. “All right, chief. If you trust her, then so do I.”

Ikai smiled. “I trust her implicitly.” He was not surprised that Isaz should find Albana’s exceptional abilities strange and suspicious. And he

had only seen a few of them. Ikai on the other hand, knowing that the brunette was a Hybrid with Power whose abilities he still had to discover, trusted her more every day. She had become an incomparable ally.

Suddenly Albana came out from behind some rocks. “Rest a little, grandpas,” she said cheerfully. “You need it, you look terrible.”

Ikai’s eyes lingered on her: eyes black as night, long jet-black hair, roguish smile. She stepped past him with her graceful, provocative walk and winked at him. He felt something stir in his stomach. Since the day she had led them to the Shelter they had become allies, and gradually, through their daily dealings with one another and the harsh life in that small community with its scant comforts, they had become friends, good friends. At first, he had decided to stick close to her. He did not fully trust this wild and enigmatic young woman and wanted to keep her near him, in full view, in case she tried to betray them in some way. But now things were different… they were linked by an honest friendship, a companionship which grew and strengthened with each passing day. She was being more Albana with him: cheeky, wild, with that teasing personality. It meant she trusted him, and that pleased him greatly.

Ikai sank to the ground. “Yes, let’s rest. I need to get my strength back.” Albana passed him the water-skin, and he drank as if he had just crossed a desert.

Isaz breathed in deeply, then exhaled with a long sigh. “It smells the way I remember it. It’s been a long time since I was in the Fourth County. It’s nice to be back in your own land.”

“How far have we got left, Isaz?” Albana asked. She was looking out at the valley in the distance.

“We’ve reached the smallest of the three peaks of the Dark Mountains. It’s taken us longer than I expected, but that’s because we’ve had to keep hidden since we crossed the Boundary. There’s a more direct route, but it goes through some pretty well-trodden areas, and we’d run the risk of being seen.”

“You’ve guided us well,” Albana said, and frowned. “The last thing we need is to run into Hunters, or those bloody Enforcers.”

Isaz pointed. “The valley you see down there, covered by an everlasting fog, is where we’re going. The lake we’re looking for is a little to the

northeast. You can’t see it from here. It’s well-hidden and hard to reach.”

“Then… we’re almost there,” Albana said.

“Yes… although we shouldn’t really go. That place has a curse on it. The Witch of the Lake is bad news. We’ll die… or worse…”

“We have to go,” Ikai said. “My mother’s dying. I’ll do anything to save her.”

“Don’t be a coward, Isaz,” Albana said. She drew her black daggers with amazing speed. “If this Witch tries to play around with us I’ll cut her throat.”

“You don’t understand, not being from this area. Here everybody knows the Witch of the Lake is an evil being, a creature with Dark Powers. There’ve been rumors for centuries that she sacrifices beasts and humans to drink their blood. And they’re not just rumors, believe me.”

“Witch or not, dark or not, she doesn’t scare me.” Albana shook her hair to one side. “I’ve faced murderous beasts, men, Enforcers, and worse. I’m not going to be put off by the kind of wild stories you tell children around the fire to frighten them.”

“They’re not wild stories. She takes babies during the night, sacrifices them and drinks their blood so she can live forever.”

Albana looked at him reproachfully. “That’s nonsense. I don’t understand how you can believe that. You, a grown man, an experienced tracker who knows the woods and mountains and their inhabitants.”

“I’m also a man who respects the traditions of our people, their beliefs and their myths, and I’m fearful of something that’s terrorized this region for generations.”

“Ikai, make him see reason.”

“However dangerous it may be, I have to go, and there’s nothing more to be said.”

Isaz lowered his gaze apologetically. “I’ll take you there, don’t worry. I may be scared, but I’m no coward.”

“That’s better!” Albana said. She smiled and put away her daggers.

They rested and ate. The air at that altitude was cold, although the sun was shining strongly. Ikai’s mind was seething with worries… *I must save her. I can’t let her die, not now that we’ve found The Shelter and have*

somewhere to rebuild our lives in freedom. Freedom! Whatever it might take, I'm not going to let her die.

Albana's touch on his shoulder made him look up. As if those wild black eyes could read his thoughts, she said: "Don't worry, we'll save her."

Ikai was more than grateful for her words. His spirits rose. "Thank you," he said, and managed the trace of a smile.

"I'm with you, by your side. We'll make it, don't you fret."

She was so confident that he could not help feeling the same. "Yes, we will."

They went down from the summit, towards the valley between the three peaks of the Dark Mountains. Ikai soon understood why they were called that. For some unknown reason, most of the valley and the mountainsides were lost in shadow, even with a radiant sun behind them. *Hmm… doesn't exactly look like a good omen.*

Isaz led them, with Albana following and Ikai bringing up the rear. The deeper they went into the somber valley, the worse the feeling that haunted Ikai. It was as if a grim, fateful blanket had fallen on his shoulders, and no matter how hard he might shake them, he could not dislodge this feeling that something horrible was stalking them.

It was near nightfall by the time they reached the lake where they supposed they would find the Witch. They prepared their weapons and searched the entire perimeter of the lagoon, alert for any sign of the presence of the Witch, or any other monster or beast which might be lurking around. Ikai was tense, Isaz was murmuring protective prayers to Oxatsi, and even Albana appeared less determined and wild than usual. But soon they were forced to stop, for the darkness of the night came to blend with the shadows and they could not see their own hands in front of them.

They camped beside a great fallen oak and made a fire for the night. Weapons at hand, they rested around the fire in silence. But the hours went by and nothing happened, and the three companions began to relax.

"Do you think she'll appear?" Ikai asked Isaz.

"You can never tell. There's no telling what she'll do. But remember what I told you: she kills whoever she wants."

"Hah! If she tries that, I'll gut her," Albana said.

“I doubt it… many people have tried to hunt her, destroy her, but they always fail and when their bodies appear they’re headless… and bloodless…”

“I just want to talk to her,” Ikai said, looking at Albana as he spoke. “Nobody’s going to kill anybody.

She smiled. “If she appears. Or if she hasn’t left for somewhere a bit less gloomy.”

“They say the Witch has been by this lake for more than a thousand years. I doubt very much whether she’ll have left it.”

The three relapsed into silence, waiting, watching the peaceful lake.

Ikai wondered whether a little conversation would help relax them. “Tell us about yourself, Isaz,” he asked. “Are you from near here?”

“From Three Rivers, a village about four days’ journey to the south.”

“Three Rivers? Funny name for a village,” Albana said, so sarcastically that Ikai choked. “Let me guess, they built the village where three rivers meet, and their great minds couldn’t come up with anything better.”

Isaz smiled broadly. “That’s exactly it.”

Albana rolled her eyes. “So tell us, how did a tracker and hunter from Three Rivers end up in The Shelter with us?”

“It’s not something I like to talk about… but as it’s you… I’ll tell you. I had to flee Three Rivers. I killed the Proxy.”

Ikai looked up in surprise. Albana’s eyes opened wide.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I was a tracker and hunter of Three Rivers, so I had permission from Proxy Axpen to carry weapons, go hunting and get fresh meat for the village. There were three of us hunters, and we spent a lot of time away, in the forest and mountains. My sister ran our parents’ farm. May they rest in peace! They died of the fever when we were little kids. As the eldest brother, I’d always taken care of her and been in charge. My sister Lurie was well known, not only in Three Rivers but also in the villages around for her delicate beauty. Nobody believed we were siblings, seeing how unattractive I am.”

Albana giggled. “True enough.”

“Many were the young men, and the not-so-young too, who tried to gain my sister’s affection, since she wasn’t married and was already older than the customary age for it. For some reason she resisted the idea or perhaps she didn’t find a man to win her heart. Among all her suitors there was one, Karm, who was well-known as an admirer of my sister. He tried everything: gallantry, gifts, romantic walks, promises of riches and love, everything… but Lurie wasn’t convinced. There was something in him she didn’t quite like. One market morning, in the main square and in front of the whole village, Karm, dressed in his best clothes and bringing all manner of gifts, asked her to marry him. Lurie, very tactfully, refused. I was away hunting and didn’t see it happened. When I came back I was met with the news that the Proxy had put my sister in prison as she was accused of collaborating with the rebel movement. I went to see the Proxy, as I was sure that wasn’t true. I demanded to know who had made the accusation and what proof they had. Proxy Axpen showed me the evidence: in Lurie’s bedroom chest they’d found rebel writings, rolled in a parchment with a red hand on the back. I knew that couldn’t belong to my sister. She couldn’t read or write. She was a peasant. But Axpen wouldn’t listen to me. The evidence would make him look good before the Regent and the Enforcers. I begged him to let my sister go, she was innocent, for Oxatsi’s sake! I even confessed to the crime myself so that the punishment would fall on me and he’d let Lurie go. But Axpen had already reported the matter, and it wouldn’t have looked good to start confusing things. The next morning the Enforcers appeared. One Eye-of-the-Gods with a dozen Executors. They dragged my sister out and took her to the main square. They assembled the whole village and sentenced her to death. I leapt forward to rescue her, but the Executors beat me almost to death. They executed my sister in front of my very eyes. I saw her die just before I passed out.”

“That’s horrible!” Ikai said.

“Those heartless bloody Enforcers and Proxies!” Albana cried.

“I spent three weeks unable to move,” Isaz went on. “When I finally got enough strength back, I slipped into Proxy Axpen’s mansion. I put a knife to his throat and made him confess the name of my sister’s accuser. *Karm, it was Karm*! he said, a moment before I slit his throat.” He bowed his head in silence.

“I’m deeply sorry for what happened to you, Isaz,” Ikai said. “It’s truly horrible.”

Albana’s black eyes gleamed with hatred. “Did you take revenge on that vermin Karm? I’d have taken his eyes out and cut off his arms and legs. And I’d have savored every moment.”

“No, I didn’t have that satisfaction. The coward fled. I couldn’t lay my hands on him. Once I became a Pariah, pursued by the Guard, I couldn’t go on searching any longer. Shortly afterwards they called in the Hunters. If I’d stayed, they’d have caught me and killed me. That’s why I went looking for the chance to join the rebellion, which I know is ironic after what had happened, but it was all the same to me by then, and I ended up as a guide for one of the refugee groups.”

“Revenge isn’t the best way,” Ikai said.

“Nonsense,” said Albana. “Revenge is the only thing that’ll give you any peace, any relief for your soul. As long as that jackal lives, you’ll never find peace. Believe me, I speak from experience. One day I’ll have mine. I’ll kill the one who robbed me of what I most loved in this world, however impossible it might seem, however powerful that creature might be. I’ll have my revenge!”

Her determination made Ikai’s blood freeze. Albana was talking about her mother’s death, and the object of her wrath was the terrible and all-powerful God Asu.

“Maybe one day…” Isaz said.

“You should heed the young panther,” said a cavernous voice coming from the lake. “Her words are full of truth.”

Instantly the three companions turned. In the center of the lake, against the background of night and in the midst of a reddish mist, a figure was hovering suspended three feet above the water. She was thin, dressed in a brown robe with curious green runes, and her head was hooded. Her face was hidden under a mask. Long silver hair fell to her feet. Ikai’s blood froze at the sight of her.

“The Witch of the Lake!” cried Isaz. The terror in his voice infected Ikai, who nearly dropped the arrow he was nocking.

Albana drew her long daggers like lightning, crouched like a cat before her prey, and looked defiantly at the apparition.

The Witch laughed, a deep, cavernous laughter from the beyond. “Your weapons can do nothing against me, in my lake, my domains.” She swirled about herself in the air, and the silver surface of the lake turned crimson. Ikai looked up at Father Girlai and saw that he was the color of blood.

It must be the reflection of the lake, he thought. *She can’t have turned the moon red. That’s impossible.* He was wondering how much power must be needed to manage a feat like that.

“Come on, young tiger. Let your arrow fly if you so wish.”

Ikai realized she meant him. In his terror Isaz had not even fitted an arrow to his bow.

“No… we don’t wish to do you any harm,” Ikai said. His voice quavered.

The Witch laughed again, and stretched out her arms in the form of a cross. The crimson mist began to move forward until it surrounded the group. It did not touch them, yet it left them no way of escape.

“I’ve come to see you,” Ikai said. “I need your help,”

“You come to ask something of me, of course,” she said, and swirled in the air again. Her brown robe with its green trimmings whirled in the night and the mask flashed intermittently, as in some dance in a nightmare. There were leather gloves on her hand and moccasins on her feet. The color of her skin was indistinguishable.

Albana whispered: “Don’t touch that fog. It’s poisonous. It’ll kill us.”

“Very perceptive, this young panther. I like that. It’s been a long, long time since anybody interesting visited me.”

“Will you help us, then?” Ikai asked.

“That depends on whether I’m interested in whatever it is you’re going to ask me and whether you’re willing to pay the price I demand for it. It will be a high price, and once it’s agreed on, you won’t be able to back out, my young tiger.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask me.”

The Witch laughed. “You all believe you can do what I ask, and yet unfortunately very few actually can. And what is it you want from me? You’re not the kind that seeks riches, glory and power. This old Witch can

read it in your eyes. Love, perhaps? Help, to save someone? A miraculous healing…?”

Ikai was astonished. How could she know?

“Don’t be so surprised, young tiger. This Witch is as old as the centuries. She’s seen and lived a lot, and she can read men like an open book.”

Albana put her mouth to Ikai’s ear. “Beware,” she whispered, so softly he barely heard her. “I feel Power, a lot of Power coming from her.”

The Witch swirled in the air several times, laughing, but this time she turned head over heels.

“The panther can feel my Power,” she said as she stopped still. “That’s interesting, and now I know why. I know what the panther is and what she’s hiding. She’s no mere human, she’s a lot more than that…”

When he saw the Witch’s interest in Albana, Ikai tensed. “I’ve come in search of a cure,” he said, trying to draw her attention back to him.

She raised her hand to her breasts. “Who for? There’s no sickness in any of you.”

“For my mother. She’s suffering from a sickness of the blood, and she’s dying.”

“Blood… you’re in luck, young tiger, that’s precisely my specialty.” She began to laugh in such a macabre manner that the hair on the back of his neck prickled.

“Blood, yes. I’ve been studying blood for many years, more than a thousand by now… it allows me to go on living… after so long…”

“The rumors are true,” murmured Isaz. “She drinks the blood of men and animals, and babies!” His neck was hunched between his shoulders.

The Witch laughed. “Of course they’re true.” She laughed again. “Even if they’re not very accurate.”

Albana put her hand to her neck and activated her disc of the Shadows.

“That won’t be necessary, my little hybrid… I see you wish to protect the young tiger, even at the risk of putting your own life in danger.” With a gloved finger she caused a thread of fog come menacingly close to Albana’s face. “But I assure you I’m not going to do him any harm, for now…”

Ikai saw that the fog was a finger's-breadth away from Albana's eye. "Stay still," he said to her.

She glanced aside at him, and her shoulders drooped.

"Very well. Now we know the young panther has Power and strong feelings towards the young tiger, let's see if I can fulfill the request which has been made to me."

Ikai and Albana exchanged glances.

"I need the patient's blood," said the Witch.

From his jerkin Ikai brought out a sealed flask which Idana had prepared for him with some of Solma's blood. He showed it to the Witch.

"Leave it on the ground."

From the crimson mist came a red translucent hand which grasped the flask and bore it to the Witch. In a single movement she opened it and drank the blood as if it were a rare elixir.

"Hmm… strange… poisoned blood… poisoned by the blood itself. Very strange."

"Can you save her?"

"I can indeed."

Ikai sighed with relief. *There's hope! She'll be saved!*

"But the price will be high: one you might not be able to pay."

"I'll pay. Ask me what you will."

Albana held him by the wrist. "Please don't sacrifice your life," she whispered.

"Before I set the price," the Witch went on, "I need one more test."

"What is it?"

"I want your blood."

Albana tugged his arm hard. "No!"

He paid no attention to her attempts to stop him. "If you want my blood, you shall have it."

"Very well, so be it."

From the Witch's chest there emerged a crystalline sphere, the size of an apple, which advanced through the mist towards Ikai. As it moved it grew

until by the time it stopped in front of him it had reached the size of a person.

“Don’t do it,” Albana muttered. “I have a bad feeling.”

But Ikai was determined. He was going to save his mother, and nothing would stop him. If he had to die for it, he would.

“Rest easy,” the Witch said. “Nothing will happen to you,”

The sphere rose with Ikai inside it. Isaz took a step back and almost touched the fog. Albana pulled him to safety.

The sphere transported Ikai through the fog over the lake, to the Witch. It was something unreal, like a dream, or rather a nightmare.

“Hold out your right arm,” the Witch said, “but don’t move. If you leave the sphere, the mist will reach you and you’ll die.”

Ikai shivered at the threat and warily stretched out his arm. He tried to make out the Witch’s face, but the mask in the form of a tree, together with her clothes, did not allow him to see anything of her. The roots covered her mouth, the trunk her nose, and the branches the eyes. It must have had some meaning he was not aware of. But what most startled him was the long white hair which fell to her feet.

The Witch held him by the wrist with a gloved hand, and with the other made a cut in his forearm. He did not see any weapon, but he felt an icy touch. Blood started to flow from the cut, and from out of the air the Witch produced a bowl made of ice to hold it. When she had enough she let go of him and turned in the air so that her back was towards him. Throwing back her mask, she drank the blood.

Once again the sepulchral laughter echoed across the lake. The Witch replaced her mask, then faced Ikai, who was clutching his cut.

“After a thousand years, you still surprise me. Your presence in itself, my young tiger, seemed extraordinary, but I wasn’t expecting your blood to be so exceptional.”

Ikai stared at her, not understanding.

“I know you don’t understand, but never fear, I’ll grant you what you wish.”

He nodded. “Thank you. And the price I have to pay?”

“The price has changed. Now I have a personal interest in you.”

“Because of my blood? So, what is the price?”

“The price is this: one day I shall call you, and that day you will leave everything and everyone and do whatever I order you to. Whatever I may wish.”

“No! Don’t accept!” cried Albana. “She might order you to take the life of a loved one, or your own. It’s a trap!”

Ikai thought about it and a chill ran down his spine. *I have no option, I have to accept*, he thought resignedly.

“I accept.”

“Your arm,” the Witch said.

Ikai held it out.

The Witch held his wrist again. With her other hand she made a gesture, and he felt another icy touch on the wound.

“Very well,” said the Witch. “The deal is sealed,”

The sphere transported Ikai back to his companions and vanished.

“Are you all right?” Albana asked.

When he looked at his arm he saw a tattoo on the wound, a tree like the Witch’s mask. He looked at Albana, searching for an explanation, but she shrugged and shook her head.

“When the tree of life awakens on your arm, the moment will have come.”

He nodded. “And the medicine for my mother?”

The Witch made a circling movement with her arms and intoned a chant. The reddish fog turned white.

And descended on them.

Ikai woke up in terrible pain. His body hurt terribly, and his head felt still worse, as if he had been given a hundred blows with a blacksmith’s hammer. It was hard to open his eyes and focus. It was daylight, and the lake was absolutely calm. Albana and Isaz were asleep beside him. *What on earth’s happened? Was it a nightmare?* he thought, and looked down at his

forearm. The tattoo of the tree was there. *It wasn't a nightmare!* He rose, horrified, and noticed something tugging at his neck. At his chest he found a small jar with strange runes on it hanging from his neck.

The potion to heal Solma!

Chapter 18

Two Guards came into Proxy Ambuk's stable and searched the ground floor, among the horses. Buried in the hay, her hands tied, Kyra tried hard not to sneeze. Her nose was very itchy, but if she sneezed she would be lost. She controlled herself, closed her eyes and clenched her jaw furiously. She endured until the two Guards went out to continue their search in the nearby woods.

Karm clambered down from under the eaves and after fishing her out, cut the cords that tied her.

"Come on, quick!" he said. "We've got to get away!"

"I'm not going anywhere with you two!"

"I realize you don't trust us, but we just saved you from the Hunters."

"Who are you?" she asked, although finding herself free she felt a little more at ease.

"We're two bloody fugitive slaves! Pariahs!" Honus said angrily from above. "We escaped from the crystal mines."

Karm gave him a look which said *let me do the talking*, and Honus' reply was to wrinkle his nose.

Kyra meanwhile was searching among the bodies they had hidden under the hay and straw.

"What are you looking for?" Karm asked.

"These!" She showed him her daggers. "I never go anywhere without my weapons."

"What the hell are we going to do now?" Honus asked.

"Escape on horseback," Kyra said.

"That's not a very good idea," said a voice from the far end of the stable.

Karm drew his sword and faced the figure that was coming into the stable. Kyra readied her daggers.

“There are half a dozen Guards coming this way,” the stranger said.

“Romen!” cried Kyra as she recognized him. “He’s with me, don’t worry.” Honus grunted from above. He did not seem very convinced.

“Was it you shooting at the Hunters from the trees?” Kyra asked.

Romen nodded. “The Hunter’s aim was better than mine,” he said, and showed them the blood on his left shoulder. “He got me.”

“Oh no!” Kyra felt around the broken arrow in his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, except that the tip’s still inside. I need you to take it out and sear the wound so it doesn’t get infected.”

Honus meanwhile had been keeping a lookout from the opening under the eaves. “You’ll have to wait. More guards are coming. Climb up, quick.”

Karm and Kyra hid the bodies more carefully by covering them with a pile of hay and straw, then climbed to the loft up an old wooden ladder with several rungs missing.

From that height, Kyra was able to see the square and what was going on there. Her blood froze. The Guard had rounded up a number of the peasants and were pushing them to the center with their spears and shields. There was no escape; all the entrances to the square had been blocked.

“I’ve never seen so many Guards together,” Kyra cried in disbelief. “There are hundreds of them!”

“They belong to the Guard of Osaen, the capital,” said Romen. He was sitting watching beside her on the straw. “There are a thousand soldiers… a display like that for such a small village… that’s strange. Very strange.”

“How on earth do you know there are a thousand soldiers?” Honus grunted as he strained his neck to count them.

“Because I’ve counted ten regiment captains, and each regiment is made up of a hundred men. You can see them there, in front of the Proxy’s house. They’re the ones riding horses. A little further on is Svariz, the Commander-in-Chief of Sesmok’s Guard. He’s an extremely dangerous man. They call him *the Black Adder.”*

Honus was eyeing Romen warily. “And how do you know all that?” he snapped.

“I used to belong to the Guard of Osaen. I’ve served with them, under the Adder.”

“You’re a bloody Guard!” Honus cried, and drew his powerful arm back ready to punch him.

Kyra moved to protect him with her own body. “Easy. Romen’s with me.”

Honus hesitated.

“Listen to what she says, she’s one of the Heroes,” Karm reminded him as he pulled back the giant’s arm.

“This doesn’t look good at all,” Romen went on. “Ten regiments from the capital, sent to this small village, with Svariz himself at the head… I don’t like this one bit.”

“And why have they rounded up the whole village?” Karm wondered aloud. “They’re no more than peasants.”

“No idea,” Romen replied in a low voice “But it looks ominous…”

“Shhhh,” Kyra said, “let’s hear what he says.”

Proxy Ambuk came out of his residence to greet Svariz. With him were two of his personal Guards. He spread his arms wide

“Commander Svariz,” Ambuk said. His voice was meek and amiable. ”Welcome to our little village. It’s an honor to receive you here.”

Svariz did not get off his horse, and neither did the ten captains behind him. He simply stared at Ambuk and spat to one side.

“How can this humble Proxy in the service of the Regent help the great Commander-in-Chief of the Guard?”

“You can forget him,” came another, powerful voice. “The one you have to deal with is me.” From the north side of the square came a rider dressed as a Hunter, escorted by a dozen others.

“Uh-oh,” Romen said. He shook his head.

“What is it?” Kyra asked. “Who’s that?”

“He’s not just any Hunter, he’s their leader. He’s Lord Hunter Osvan. The fact that he’s here is a very bad sign. He hardly ever leaves his master’s side. He’s the Regent’s rabid dog, with an iron jaw and an infallible sense of

smell. He carries out all his master's orders, and he delights in blood. Particularly shedding it…"

Kyra felt a shiver run down her spine.

Ambuk meanwhile was bowing low. "How can I serve Lord Hunter Osvan?"

"I don't like this," Honus protested.

"Sh," Kyra said. She wanted to hear the conversation. Luckily the wind was blowing towards the stable.

Osvan came up to Svariz, whom he greeted with a nod. All the riders took their places behind them protectively.

Svariz raised his fist and ordered: "Form a circle!"

At his order the Guard closed in behind the riders around the villagers in the square. The people were pushed into the middle where they crowded, with a solid circle around them, shield against shield.

Watching the scene, Kyra felt her stomach lurch. Why were they surrounding all those defenseless farmers? What did they intend to do?

"Ambuk," said Osvan as he watched the maneuver behind him. "an unfortunate rumor has reached me: one that leaves you in a rather awkward position."

Ambuk tensed. "Over the years I've learnt not to pay too much attention to rumors, my Lord Hunter. Life is too short to be wasted on giving credit to gossip…"

"That's very true. And it's even shorter for the Regent's enemies."

"My lord knows I've always been a faithful and devout servant of Regent Sesmok. I've loyally governed this farming village for his greater glory."

"And that being the case, how come you didn't report that two of the traitors, those the peasant rabble call the heroes, are from this village?"

Kyra's eyes opened wide. "How do they know that?" she whispered to Romen, who met her gaze in astonishment.

Ambuk stiffened at the accusation. "I've never given credit to these rumors about the Heroes. They're nothing but the gossip of the rabble, in my humble opinion."

“You’re clever, I have to admit. But that won’t save you. Not from me. Two siblings, from a family of farmers: surely you remember? The boy, particularly. He was a Hunter… Ikai’s his name… hers is Kyra. Do you remember them now?”

Kyra swallowed. They knew about them, even their names! How was that possible?

“Yes, I remember the boy… Ikai. A Hunter, young…” He did not mention Kyra.

Osvan scratched his beard. “I understand he came to see you before he left for the city.”

“He came to see me a while ago, that’s right. His sister had been Summoned. He wanted my help. But I couldn’t do anything for him. It’s the law of the Gods. Once she’d been Selected by the Golden, his sister’s fate was sealed.”

Osvan narrowed his eyes. “But you did reveal something you shouldn’t have, didn’t you, Ambuk? Something that mustn’t be divulged, a place where his sister was held. A piece of information the Hunter could only have learnt from someone with privileged information, from you…”

Ambuk remained silent, trying to think up a reply. The accusation had unsettled him.

“I didn’t tell the young Hunter anything, I assure you. And I never heard from him again.”

“Maybe not. But we have. That hunter was captured and taken before the Regent. He escaped when he was being interrogated by the High Priest Torkem. Someone helped him, a traitor Captain of the Guard, one Liriana. Do you know anything about her?”

Kyra swore. They already knew of Liriana’s existence. It would not be long before they made the connection and discovered the rest of the group. She clenched her jaw. This was very bad news.

Ambuk shook his head. “I assure you I know nothing of any traitor, and I didn’t help Ikai or Kyra in any way which might go against the laws of the Gods.”

“But the crimes of that fugitive Hunter go even further. He made an attempt against the life of his own Master Hunter, and he killed several of his comrades in his flight.”

“I assure you I have no idea what all this has to do with me.”

From inside the Proxy’s house came one of the Guards, limping, a bloody bandage on his thigh.

Kyra covered her mouth to muffle a cry. “Oh no! It’s Ambuk’s guard, the one I wounded!”

The guard was intercepted by the Guards as he went to Svariz, but the Commander waved at him to come closer and he was allowed through. He whispered something in the Commander’s ear.

Svariz’s face turned crimson with fury. He pointed his sword at Ambuk. “He sheltered the fugitive! Get that traitor!”

Four of Svariz’s soldiers grabbed the Proxy and forced him to his knees, to the amazement of the villagers.

“Good,” Osvan said in a menacing voice. “And now we’ve established that you’re a traitor who’s helped two of the so-called Heroes – fugitives who’ve broken the law of the Gods and acted against the representatives of the Regent – tell me where we can find them.”

“I have no idea where they might be. Their farm is to the east of the village.”

Osvan smiled crookedly. “Yes, I know that. My Hunters have already searched the farm. It’s curious: I’ve been told it was burnt to ashes, just like their neighbors,’ and both families have disappeared. Could that have been so that my Hunters couldn’t follow their trail?”

Ambuk remained silent.

“You don’t even have to confirm it. I know that was the reason. I’ll ask you again, Proxy. Where are Kyra and Ikai?”

“I don’t know…”

Karm, watching the scene beside Kyra, breathed out heavily. “This is going to turn nasty very quickly.”

“Then we’d better get out of here as fast as we can,” said Honus.

“I’m going to get the horses ready. Come with me and check that no Hunters or Guards come anywhere near.”

Kyra glanced at Romen, who was staunching his wound with a bloody hand. She gave Karm a warning look.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to leave him. If he’s with you, he’s with me. Your cause is mine.”

Kyra nodded in acceptance. Karm climbed down to the floor of the stable with Honus following.

“I’ll ask this for one last time,” came Osvan’s booming voice. “Where are Kyra and Ikai?”

The Proxy was silent.

“I see I’ll have to use one of my skills on you,” Osvan said, and took a braided leather whip from one of his saddlebags. He uncoiled it slowly, letting it fall to the ground, then smiled and cracked it. The leather lacerated Ambuk’s forehead, and he moaned in pain.

“Swine!” cried Kyra, and Romen had to cover her mouth.

“Turn him round and hold him fast,” Osvan ordered the Guards who were holding Ambuk. “Don’t worry, I never miss.”

The whip cracked ten times, searing the air, spattering both the Guards and the ground with blood.

Kyra was overcome with fury. She wanted to leap down and run to the square to help Ambuk, but Romen held her back.

Ten more lashes echoed in the square, carrying a message of pain and blood. Ambuk was on his face on the ground, his back crossed by bloody lacerations, his robe in tatters. He moaned in pain, while the villagers remained dumbstruck at what was happening.

Osvan smiled sardonically. “Perhaps now you’ll feel more inclined to cooperate. Where are Kyra and Ikai?”

Ambuk raised his head to look at Osvan. Blood was running down his forehead.

“I… don’t… know…”

Osvan sighed. “I see I haven’t been convincing enough. I’ll have to try a bit harder.” He gave a signal to Svariz.

Svariz turned in his saddle, raised his fist and shouted: “Guards, get ready!” His men stood straight and readied shield and spear. “Shield blow!”

With a sharp clash a thousand shields drove at the first row of villagers. With cries of surprise, pain and horror they fell backwards, toppling others as they did so.

“No…” Ambuk said from the ground.

“If you don’t want your villagers to suffer, you’d better speak. I’m not leaving here without an answer, and if I have to sacrifice these stinking farmers to get it, I will.”

Ambuk tensed, and a murmur of fear filled the square.

“He won’t dare,” Kyra whispered to Romen in horror.

“I see I’m not quite managing to convince you,” Osvan said. He gave a signal to Svariz, who raised his fist and ordered: “Guards, get ready! Spear strike!”

In a near-simultaneous movement a thousand spears stabbed at the first row of villagers. Cries of horror broke out. In panic, the villagers tried to escape from the circle, but were either skewered by the spears or driven back by brutal shield-blows. None of them could escape, and hundreds died.

Kyra, struck dumb, felt she would lose her reason. They were slaughtering her neighbors like cattle.

Beside herself with rage, she cried: “I’ll kill you all!” and drew her daggers. Romen struggled to hold her back, but was handicapped by his wounded shoulder. Kyra pushed him aside and ran down the ladder. “I’ll gut you all!”

Karm tried to stop her with his arms outstretched.

“Calm down. You can’t. They’ll kill you!”

But she was blinded by the force of her own impotent rage. She raised her daggers to Karm. “Let me go,” she cried.

There was a sharp thud, and her legs buckled under her.

Osvan’s shout reached them from the square: “Where are they, you bloody traitor? Tell me, or Svariz will give the order again. It’s a very effective move: shield strike, followed by spear strike. His men are masters of it. If you don’t want any more peasants wiped out, tell me where they’re hiding. Tell me!”

Ambuk raised his bloody arm in defeat. “The… stable…” He pointed. “Don’t kill any more… I beg you…”

“Search it!” Osvan ordered his Hunters.

They did not take long to find the bodies. But by then three horses were galloping fast, following the river, fleeing towards the capital.

Honus looked at Kyra, who was lying unconscious on Karm's horse. "That one's really going to hate me. I only just met her and I've already hit her twice on the head, the second time with a log."

"Don't worry," Romen said. He winced in pain. "She's tough, and rather get a blow on the head than fall into the hands of those murderers. You did the right thing. And now ride. We'll soon have the Hunters on top of us. Ride for your lives!"

In the square, the Hunters reported their findings to Osvan. The Lord Hunter turned to Ambuk, crimson with rage. Saliva flew as he shouted.

"That means she was hiding in the stable all this time. That fugitive, with the help of whoever was with her, has killed Svariz's men. She's killed several of my Hunters! My men! While you were stalling me! While you were laughing in my face!"

Ambuk tried to plead, but his head failed him and his face fell back on to the ground.

"Lift that treacherous bastard up!" Osvan ordered, and two guards lifted him by the arms so that he hung like a broken puppet.

Osvan dismounted, grasped Ambuk's hair and pulled his head back.

"I want you to witness what happens to traitors," he whispered into the Proxy's ear. Then he turned to the horrified villagers. "I want all of you to know what awaits traitors. Nobody escapes the law of the gods! Nobody escapes what Sesmok's decided! Those who shelter or aid the Heroes are sentenced to death! Those who know the Heroes and yet fail to deliver them to us will be sentenced to death! That's what you need to learn, and learning comes with blood!"

Svariz looked at him, awaiting his command.

"Kill them all, and burn the village to ashes," Osvan ordered. "Let it be an example to the other villages, to all the Counties. Leave a few alive so they can spread the word."

Svariz raised his arm amid the terrified sobbing and pleading of the villagers.

"Attention, Guard! Spear strike! All the way!"

While the soldiers delivered death and the cries of horror rose to the heavens, Osvan looked into Ambuk's eyes, half-closed and covered in blood.

"That's what awaits those who oppose Regent Sesmok."

"One day… the Heroes will kill you… and free the people from slavery… and from monsters…. like you…"

"That will never happen, you fool!" said Osvan, and killed him.

Chapter 19

The entrance to the Western Temple shone faintly in the light of two big braziers. Like flaming guards they stood at the concave double door which gave way to the sacred precinct. The building was spherical and completely golden, which made it unmistakable, even more so in the First Ring where the buildings were crystalline.

Adamis watched warily from a prudent distance. His face was hidden under a cloak with a white hood. Most of the temples, of different sizes according to their importance, kept that rounded shape, following the ancient beliefs. *The sphere: representing the protection of The Five. Gold: the glorious final destiny awaiting the Golden*, he mused, alert to any suspicious movement. On the façade the carved runes in honor of the founders of the Golden Dogma stood out. The temple was in the less privileged part of the Ring, where the third caste lived: the Commons. As the most populous of the castes, they occupied a third of the whole extension of the Ring. They were mostly Warriors, Seamen, Priests, Healers, Craftsmen and minor Merchants.

He narrowed his eyes and made sure he could not perceive any Power or other danger near him. *I suppose they must have chosen this temple because it is in the very center of my father's realm. They must know I would never come to a temple in any other Ring. Even though temples are sacred and blood cannot be shed in them, that is the law, punishable by death.*

He knew the place. He had been there to represent his Royal House on several occasions for ceremonies and sacred rituals. Once, when he was a child, he remembered being there with his father. He could not remember the occasion, but the High King had presided over the ceremony. The Five High Kings were the highest authority, above the high priests who served them faithfully, always following the path to eternal life. Adamis remembered well the solemnity his father had shown on that day; perhaps that was why the place had become engraved in his memory.

He scanned the area, in front of the temple. It was deserted. This did not surprise him; everybody was resting, masters and slaves alike. At that late hour only a few Enforcers were wandering about: some on watch-duty, like the two Custodians standing by the Square of the Roses a little further down, others finishing their work and their preparations for the following day, like several Eyes-of-the-Gods who were heading for the docks. The sky was overcast that night, with the moon hidden behind dark clouds.

Not a good omen for an appointment which may very possibly be a trap. The Prince assessed the situation one last time and came to a decision. *Let us find out who wants to speak to me in secrecy, and why.* He lowered his head and crossed the square towards the temple.

He found the door open, as it should be: the priests' duty was to care for the wellbeing of all their people, day and night, without rest, for all eternity. He went in cautiously, ready to react at the least sign of danger. The temple proved to be empty except for a single priest who was nodding off beside a brazier.

When the priest woke and saw him, he got to his feet with a start, lost his balance and nearly fell. When he had recovered, he bowed.

"Well… welcome! How may I help you tonight? Are you looking for the way to eternity?"

Adamis stopped a few paces from him and gave him an appraising glance. The man of faith had not activated his power, and judging by his appearance, which was rather disheveled and self-satisfied, he seemed to be a genuine priest. This was something Adamis had not expected. He certainly was no soldier or assassin.

Adamis returned the bow. "We are all looking for the way to eternity."

"You have come to the right place. The Western Temple, although the most distant from its destination, is the one that reminds us that the path is long and that we must never falter."

Adamis nodded.

"Come in, and we shall look together upon the golden path, for our conjoined spirits make the wait for the glorious day more bearable, as the Golden Dogma says."

Without really knowing how to reply to the words of faith, Adamis followed the priest.

“Or perhaps you might prefer to meditate alone? Yes, you would, of course, wouldn’t you? How unperceptive of me. You must forgive me. The hours of solitude are so many that one is grateful for company.”

Adamis gazed at him without saying anything.

“Of course you prefer to meditate alone. I shall leave you to it. If you need me I will be at the back.” The priest turned and vanished through a round door.

Odd, Adamis thought. *He must spend too much time shut up in here*. He waited for a moment, tense and alert, but nothing happened. Yet he had the feeling that at any moment half a dozen soldiers of the House of Aureb would attack him from behind. But nothing happened. *Perhaps they will not come. Perhaps they have thought better of it.*

There came a metallic click, and he half-turned. A round trapdoor was opening in the floor a few paces away. He invoked his Power at once and prepared to attack.

A light came out of the trapdoor, followed by a mental message.

Fear nothing, Adamis. It is not my wish to cause you any harm. You are among friends.

It was the voice of the woman from the pearl. He almost raised his protective sphere, but held back. He used his Power to send a fine mist down the trapdoor, as if it were a spirit, the mist inspected what was awaiting him on the lower level. It reported: A person: woman, powerful, alone.

Come down, I beg you. We need to talk.

He hesitated. He knew he ought not to put himself in danger. His father would be furious if he did.

Please. It is extremely important.

The Prince measured the Power the woman emitted. She was Powerful, of a noble family, ancient… but not as Powerful as he was, as his own family was.

If he kept alert he could defeat her, should she threaten him, although nothing was ever certain when weapons, or the Power, were drawn. It would not be the first time that one of lesser lineage and with less Power had killed a noble with far more. There were too many variables at work in

a confrontation. But he had been trained to use his Power, and in combat, few of the Golden could defeat him. Still, his father's words came to his mind: "There is always someone better, stronger, more powerful. Remember this, or else it will be your downfall. There is no place for pride or vanity in my House."

I have no wish to disobey my father, but I must find out what is behind all this. He went down the opening. A flight of stone stairs led him to a damp, cold underground chamber lit by two oil lamps. The trapdoor closed after him. At the far end he saw the woman of the pearl come in from an adjoining room. Her face was hidden by a curious mask in the shape of a tree, and she wore a simple green linen robe. From her shoulders fell a brownish-green cloak with little decoration.

"Thank you for coming," she said, stretching out her arms, palms up, and bowing her head solemnly in a gesture of peace. "I am truly grateful."

Adamis watched her with a frown, searching for a possible hidden trap. He was not prepared to let himself be fooled by the young woman's friendly aura.

"I did not think you would be willing to come, not in this irregular fashion… and particularly being as you are a Prince of one of the Five Houses… I am pleased that you have. I can understand that the secrecy of this meeting makes you wary, but you have nothing to fear from me or my intentions."

Adamis was frowning. "Who are you?"

"Forgive me, your Highness. My name is Ariadne. I am a Commoner, a Healer."

"Healer? For which House? Whom do you serve?"

"All of them and none, my lord, or so I like to think. I serve whoever is in need, the infirm, the wounded, whoever suffers."

Adamis was not happy with this answer. *She must belong to one of the Five Houses, whatever her profession may be.*

"Which House?" he asked again, sternly.

"I was born in the House of Aru, the House of the Fifth Ring."

Using a tiny fraction of his Power so that the Healer would be unaware of it, he tried to perceive the essence of the young woman's Power. *I feel*

water, so she is not lying; she does belong to the Fifth Ring. But there is something else… as if there were a little of each of the other elements, as if they were mixed. That is very uncommon. Power develops around one element and one alone.

"If you had asked for an audience I would have granted it. All this… was not necessary simply to speak with me."

The woman raised her head, but the mask prevented him from seeing her eyes clearly.

"You see, your Highness, this meeting must be, and remain, a secret. Many lives depend on that."

Adamis was not at all happy about this. The last thing he needed was to get mixed up in more trouble and upset his father even more.

"You had better explain yourself," he said firmly.

"This meeting has been arranged in this way for two reasons. First, so that no one can know it has taken place, since we both have many enemies who spy on every step we take. As a result of a notorious incident, for which you are to leave at dawn for the distant land, you are the focus of all eyes in the Five Rings. For this, an audience would have betrayed my presence to many unwanted observers. We cannot allow that. My actions must remain secret. The second reason has to do with your character. We needed to know whether you would come, by yourself, and that I would not be arrested. The fact that you have come says much in your favor, and confirms what we were expecting."

"We? I thought you were alone."

"Tonight I am, but nevertheless I could not be more accompanied and supported. I am not here for myself. I have come as an ambassador, to strengthen connections before you go into exile."

"Ambassador? I do not understand you. Relations between my House and that of Aru are excellent."

The young woman shook her head. "I am not here to represent the House of the Fifth Ring. I am here to represent the Children of Arutan," and she pointed at the mask she wore.

Adamis took a step back in amazement. "The Children of Arutan were exterminated several millennia ago."

“That is what the powerful Five Houses believe and wish.”

He shook his head. “No, it cannot be. The archives of knowledge make it clear that all members of the sect were exterminated more than five thousand years ago.” He vaguely remembered the emblem of the secret order: an oak in flower.

“Sect? That is what the powerful called them, those who pursued the peaceful founding fathers, hunted and killed them, then catalogued them. But they were never a sect.” She spread her arms wide. “And we have not been exterminated, as you can see.”

“You mean to tell me you are trying to revive the Children of Arutan?”

“They were never dead. We have always been here, watching, protecting our Mother Nature Arutan, serving her with absolute loyalty, living according to her principles, being her good children. We have kept ourselves hidden from the eyes of the powerful, from the ancient noble families. Always carrying out our work from the shadows, with the fear of being discovered, of being pursued once again, of being all-but-exterminated once again, if our existence were revealed.”

“Are you looking to reintroduce their dangerous beliefs?”

“You say *dangerous*, your Highness, but in truth they are not, not for the Commoners. They are indeed for the powerful families of the Five Houses: not for their content, but because they go against the established order. What is the danger in respecting Mother Nature? What is so dangerous in caring for her, protecting her and living according to her wise teachings? What is so dangerous in renouncing violence, following the way of peace, living in harmony with other races, other species, other creatures? There is nothing dangerous in us, in our ideals. On the contrary, I believe it is the way we must follow, abandoning our present one, which is full of death, pain, slavery and the vain search for immortality for the greater glory of the powerful. All that will only lead us to a cataclysm. One which is already on its way.”

“You speak of peace and harmony but your true message is one of treachery. You seek the downfall of the established order, as you have always done, and that is to go against the Five High Kings, against my father, my family… against me. You speak of protecting Nature and following her teachings. Is that not the foundation of our beliefs? That is

precisely what the Dogma is based on. And from the need to protect Mother Nature came the creation of the High Kings, so that the old families would not fight among them for the power, so that they would rule wisely."

"And has it been so, I ask you?"

"It has indeed been so. We have enjoyed peace for several millennia, and it has seldom been broken. The system is not perfect – I admit it myself – but it has allowed us to prosper, without wars, with order, with purpose."

"The Five Houses are at perpetual war with each other. Blood might not be shed as often as in the olden days, but that is an illusion. The struggle for power continues, stronger than ever, even in the heart of the Houses themselves. The ancient families fight to stay in a position of privilege and wait for the slightest misstep so as to gain power for their own House. Or does your father, the High King, not keep a close watch on his own cousins and the longest-lived and most powerful families within the House of Eret?"

Adamis was silent, Ariadne was right on that point, but the families guaranteed order and progress. So they had done for thousands of years.

"You speak of prosperity, but at what cost? Alantres, our wonderful city, grows out of hand, perversely, giving free rein to its lords' vainglorious dreams. The cost: slavery for thousands of people, suffering and death such as we have never before caused. Why? Because we want to live like the Gods we are not, because we want to reach the divinity which immortality promises us. And to that end our Erudites twist and pervert our Mother Nature's most sacred principles, making hybrids, creating monstrosities, cruel servants without a will of their own, to serve us so that we may live better, believing still further in the promised falsehood, developing new technologies for a corrupt end. No, the Children of Arutan do not wish for this false and abominable world. We do not wish it to go on poisoning our Mother. We wish to return to her basic principles, to the beginning, to the harmony, when we were not corrupted by greed for false divinity."

Listening to Ariadne's words, Adamis could not avoid feeling rage. Rage because the young woman's vehement words meant treason, and rage too because he knew that to a certain extent she was right.

"That vision is unfair and extremist," he said haughtily, "and also high treason."

“Perhaps. Or perhaps it is the chimerical Golden Dogma which is that: proclaimed by false priests to a misled society, all in the service of five High Kings and their long-lived, powerful families.”

“Very well. In that case, tell me: how do the Children of Arutan want us to live and prosper?”

He wanted to understand the young woman’s position. Before meeting Kyra, he would never have tolerated a speech like this. It represented high treason. Now, though, he wanted to understand the reasons behind the words. Perhaps he was no longer the same vain aristocrat he had been, or perhaps he still was… what he knew for a fact was that Kyra had changed him. Changed him for the better, even though there was still much left in him to change. It is not enough for a Prince to be born, he must be made.

Ariadne heaved a deep sigh. “By respecting Mother Nature, following her teachings. By discarding the Golden Dogma, since we will never be immortal, nor should we wish to be. By rejecting the manipulation of Mother Nature, whether it involves searching for immortality or creating servants and other aberrations. By abolishing the regime of the Five High Kings, since their rule benefits them and their families alone. By doing away with the three classes, since we all come from Mother Nature and to her do we return at the end of our days. By uniting the Five Rings, since we should not be separated but united, like brothers and sisters. The Power, the greatest gift Arutan has given us and the thing which sets us apart from other species, does not have to be specialized and divided; the five elements can coexist in any one of us. And most of all, we must look for peace and harmony: not only among ourselves, but among the rest of the races, since we are all children of Arutan.”

Ariadne’s declaration was so moving and honest, and defended with such conviction, that Adamis was left speechless. He could not find words to refute the young woman’s arguments, and this unsettled him even more. For a single moment his thoughts turned to Kyra. He remembered her courage, her dedication, her fire, the truths she had spoken, and Ariadne’s words began to leave their mark on his spirit.

And yet they could not be allowed to. All this was high treason, after all. The woman sought the downfall of his father and his family. All the same, he felt a deep unease in the pit of his stomach.

“Why do you come to me? Why are you revealing your existence to me? I belong to the establishment, I belong to one of the oldest families among our people, whose origins lie in the dark days. Everything you have told me goes against my family and my principles.”

Ariadne’s face was now deeply worried.

“A turbulent time is coming, a time of great danger, for everyone. We are nearing the precipice of the eternal void, and if we do not change course we will fall into it, never to return. The time to act is now, before everything is lost, before there is no salvation left for the Golden, before we are consumed by our own ambition and wrong-headed vanity. We must fight, and that is why I was sent to look for you. We need to join forces, to seek allies, since by ourselves we cannot defeat the evil which will soon come to threaten our people. That, your Highness, is why we came to you.”

“To me? Have you forgotten who I am? I am a Prince. You talk of fighting, of opposing the Five High Kings. You talk of treason. I should hand you over to the Guard.”

“But you will not do that, your Highness. Not if the Ancients, our spiritual guides, have chosen well. Not if there is still hope for the Golden.”

Adamis knew he should turn in that subversive young woman. It was not the first time the Houses had faced internal rebellion, nor would it be the last. *Where some rule, there will always be others who oppose that rule. That is logical and natural. Accepting things as they are, just because they are, is not rational. But she speaks of fighting, and that is a step too far.*

“Why me?” he insisted. He wanted to know the specific reason before he made his decision and handed her over to be taken for trial.

“The rumor has reached our Wise Ones that one of the most powerful Princes, the son of one of the High Kings, member of one of the most powerful families which go back to the dawn of time, has fought another Prince as powerful and highborn as himself, shedding blood, during the lower cycle.”

Adamis attempted to make light of this. “It has happened before.”

“So it has, but never to defend a slave.”

He was petrified. The details of what had happened were secret. And he had never admitted it had been for a slave. Not even to his father, although the King had guessed.

“Who told you that? Answer me!”

“The Children of Arutan have eyes and ears in all the great houses. They notice anything significant that happens. And this one, your Highness, is deeply significant. For a long time the Ancients have been following you with interest, as they do others among the privileged classes who are different, who do not submit themselves to the system, who think for themselves, who have their own voice. Your actions reveal much about your honor and courage, and that is how the Ancients have interpreted them. That is why they have sent me. They wish to have you as an ally, to be able to count on your support in the dark times which are coming.”

“Your Ancients see too much where there is very little. What times of darkness are you talking about?”

Ariadne bowed her head. “The Erudites of the Five Houses, in their misguided eagerness for immortality, in their stubbornness to achieve advances for our society, are corrupting the elemental principles of Mother Nature. Very soon they will make abominable discoveries which go against the very existence of what is natural. The Ancients know that the technological race, the experiments with animals, humans and our own vital essence are reaching a point of no return. Your own Erudites carry out their research tirelessly, do they not?”

Adamis thought about Notaplo’s experiments, then of the other Houses. It was true that there were rumors of secret, dangerous experiments being conducted in several Houses, seeking not only to reach immortality but to gain more Power. He was thoughtful as he looked into the eyes of the young woman, deciding her fate, considering everything she had revealed. It was too much information, too important to allow him to make a hasty decision. Ariadne seemed to read the doubt in his eyes.

“Will you turn me in?”

Adamis considered it. “No. You may leave.”

“What answer should I give the Ancients?”

“Tell them I will meditate on what you have told me.”

Ariadne produced a pearl and gave it to him. “Through this you will find me, and through me you will reach the Ancients.”

He nodded and took the pearl. Ariadne turned and left the underground chamber.

As soon as Adamis set foot in the street, Teslo appeared from among the shadows of the night. With him came a squad of his trusted soldiers, armed and ready.

“Shall I have her arrested?” he asked, his eyes fixed on Ariadne’s figure in the distance.

“No, have her followed. I want to know where she goes and who she deals with. Keep an eye on her.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Adamis looked at the pearl in his hand. He could feel the Power it gave off. *Curious. Certainly an interesting meeting, and a very dangerous one. I will have much to think about during my journey of exile to the continent…*

Chapter 20

“I don’t understand why we have to wait here,” Kyra said. She crossed her arms and leaned back against the stone wall of the busy tavern with a snort. She stretched her legs under the table and breathed in the rancid air of the place.

“Take it easy,” said Karm, who was sitting beside her. He was surveying the undistinguished customers of that ill-reputed inn. “It’s what your friend Romen asked us to do. This isn’t the moment for impatience. He said he’d be back with the information we need. Or so we hope.”

“We’d better not arouse suspicions, spitfire,” Honus said. He raised his beer mug to her from across the table.

Kyra sat up straight on the wooden bench. “I’m not going to arouse any suspicion, ugly. And don’t point at me, you great lump. The only one who’s going to attract attention here is you. You’re as ugly as you’re big. And don’t make me angry. I’ve got my eye on you.” She put her hand to her neck, which luckily hurt less now. Honus’ two blows a couple of days before had been both accurate and powerful.

“I know perfectly well I’m not much to look at, but here among whores and drunkards I’m a king,” Honus said. He laughed and took a swig of beer.

“Have you forgotten Romen’s warning already?”

“Yeah… yeah… the soldiers of the Guard use this joint too when they’re off duty. They come for the women and the alcohol… I haven’t forgotten.”

“I can’t afford to waste time,” she said impatiently. “Time’s exactly what I don’t have. I must get to Sesmok’s surgeon,”

“Stay put,” Karm said. He put his hand on her wrist to hold her back. “Wandering around the streets of the capital when you don’t know it is suicide. They’re all looking for you: the Guard, the Hunters and the Enforcers. Do you really think you’d get anywhere near the palace by yourself without being caught? You wouldn’t, and I’m not going to let them

capture one of our Heroes, not as long as I can help it. You're too valuable to all of us."

Kyra wrinkled her nose. "I got to this stinking tavern in the Merchants' quarter, didn't I? I just have to get a bit further north."

"Hah!" said Honus, and took another gulp. "I like this girl, she's got guts! If she'd been with us in the Crystal Mines we wouldn't have lasted a month. The Tormentors would've torn us to pieces because of her." He laughed again.

"Tormentors?"

"They're the Enforcers they use at the mines," Karm said. He gestured to one side. "We'll explain later. I see Romen's just come in."

Romen, his arm in a sling and his head covered by a hood, made his way over to them through the throng of customers, who did not pay him any attention. He sat down in front of Kyra, beside Honus.

"It's taken you forever!" said Kyra.

Romen smiled at her with his usual charm. His blue eyes gleamed. "I'm glad to see you too."

"Beer?" Honus asked cheerfully.

"Yes, good idea."

Kyra frowned. Sparks flashed from her eyes. "Beer? What do you mean, beer?"

Honus ignored her and asked one of the serving-girls for another round.

"We have to put on an act while we're waiting," Romen said.

"Wait? What, even longer?"

"I went to see my group," began Romen, and his face grew somber. "Things are very bad. Two of them have died at the hands of the Enforcers. A third was captured by the Guard. He shook his head. "They're looking for the Heroes and the leaders of the resistance. They're combing the capital. I had to take a risk to reach my last contact here in Osaen. I gave him the message that we're here. If he manages to pass the message on without being caught, we might get help from the resistance."

"But, aren't you with them?" Karm asked "Can't you pass on the message yourself?"

Romen shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. I only know my own group, and that’s just five rebels. And they only know another five. That’s how we communicate, and that’s the guarantee that if one’s captured, the whole resistance doesn’t fall with him.”

“By Oxatsi, that’s good thinking!” said Honus.

“On the other hand,” Kyra said, “it might take an eternity to contact Liriana. The plan was to contact her and get information that would let us get to the Surgeon.”

“Liriana’s a leader. I don’t have direct contact with her precisely because I know her. She’s the one who calls me when she needs me, not the other way around. I’m sorry.”

“And what about us?” Karm asked.

“I haven’t forgotten about you. To be able to enter the organization you have to speak with someone of rank. Liriana’s the right person.”

“So what now?” Kyra asked. She sounded bad-tempered. Time was slipping by and they were making no progress.

“For now we wait. I know you’re upset, but if you go out there they’ll catch you, and that’s something I can’t let happen.” Romen looked hard at her, his blue eyes imploring her ruby ones. “You’ve got to listen to me for once, do as I say,”

Kyra would have liked to get up and leave, but his anxious gaze was too much for her.

“All right, then. But I’m not going to wait for long.”

The serving girl arrived with the drinks, and Honus paid her a gross compliment. Karm glared at him, and his reply was a shrug and another swig from his beer. Time passed slowly. Kyra was feeling more and more anxious, and the fact that the place was filled with drunkards and women of easy virtue was not helping.

Suddenly someone came over to them. They did not see where he had come from, and started in surprise. The stranger picked up a stool from a nearby table and sat down with them. Kyra looked toward the door, but he had not come in that way. She stiffened, and her hand went to her dagger.

“The Guard’s patrolling every corner of the city, with the Hunters backing them up,” said the stranger in a low voice. “They’re searching for

you. They know you managed to get into Osaen."

"Damn!" said Kyra. "I thought we'd lost them."

"It's very hard to lose Hunters," said the stranger without lifting his head. His voice had the conviction of experience. "In the open field, or in the forest, it's practically impossible. Here in the city among all the Senoca trying to survive one more day, maybe …"

The four were staring at the newcomer, but his manner did not change.

Kyra realized that she had let slip too much information. She stared at the shadow which was the man's face under his hood. "Who are you?"

"A friend," he replied softly.

"I have no friends in the capital."

"That's not quite true, Hero of the Senoca, you have a friend here, another Hero, like you, and we share her friendship."

"Liriana?" Kyra asked.

"Shh. Better not to mention names in Osaen, they might fall into enemy ears. But yes, I'm her friend."

"Who are you? Show yourself."

"I will for just a moment, so that you recognize me in the future, but I can't show you more because my life's in danger. I'm a wanted man, almost as much as the Heroes."

The stranger's hands pulled the hood back half-way, revealing his face. Kyra had never seen it before, but she knew at once he was a friend. He must have been more than seventy. His face was leathery, his hair and beard as white as snow and his features angular. His eyes, an intense blue, shone with the unmistakable gleam of deep intelligence.

She glanced at Romen, but he shook his head. He did not know him either.

The stranger drew his hood back over his face.

"If you're here, and you know Liriana, then you're with the rebels," Kyra said, more as a question than a statement.

"Yes, I'm with the cause. A message reached me from one of our own" – he turned to Romen – "asking for help. He said he had one of the Heroes with him. This old dreamer had no choice but to come and see. The last

thing I'd want is to see one of the Heroes in the hands of Sesmok, or the Enforcers."

"Then help us, old man. I don't have much time."

"I see you're more straightforward and down-to-earth than your brother…"

"You know my brother?"

"Yes, I know him. Our paths have crossed several times."

"So, will you help us, then?"

"I'll make you a proposition, young Hero, as I did to your brother before he set off to rescue you from the Eternal City. I'll help you in exchange for your help in the difficult days which are coming. Unfortunately that's the way things work in this ungrateful world…"

"What do you want of me?" Kyra asked. There was distrust in her narrowed eyes.

"The message of freedom already flies high, like an eagle: unstoppable, majestic, over fields, villages and cities of the Six Counties. It's a message of hope, of a dream the Senoca had lost and are now regaining little by little. It's been a long hard effort organizing ourselves so that this rumor can reach the peasant, the farmer, the woodcutter, the miner, the shepherd, the apothecary, the craftsman, the people, every one of the Senoca. And we're succeeding."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"What's enabled the message to spread so quickly and reach so many is the appearance of the Heroes who have defied the Gods in their own dwelling and emerged victorious. You are a symbol for the people. You represent what they wish to be, but which their defeated and fearful spirits will not let them be. At night they dream of being Heroes, but fear overcomes them by day."

"I still don't know why you need me."

The stranger gave a bitter laugh. "Youth gives us energy, courage, momentum, but not vision. That comes with experience, with time. We need you because the whisper must become a shout, the unanimous cry of an entire people demanding their freedom."

Kyra began to understand.

“The time has come to rebel, for the people to rise against the tyranny of the Regent, against the cruelty of the Enforcers and their masters the Gods. What was once a spark is now a flame, the flame of rebellion. It’s already begun to burn fiercely, and it will keep growing as the Counties join and rise in an unstoppable fire that will consume the whole Boundary. And from those ashes the Senoca people will rise again, free and filled with hope.”

“Hey, this guy can speak all right!” Honus muttered. “I almost feel like joining the rebels.” Karm kicked him under the table and put his finger to his lips.

The stranger turned to Kyra. “But in order that this may triumph, the people need leaders to follow, and those leaders are you, the Heroes. And that’s why we need you.”

“Honus is right,” Kyra said. “You talk beautifully, you’re a real visionary… I’d even say the prophet that the people need.”

“We all have our part to play in this critical moment in the history of our people. My role in the movement that will make us free one day is that of philosopher and thinker.”

Honus’ mouth twisted. “And agitator,” he said

“True. I don’t deny my responsibility. I’m the organizer of the rebellion, and that’s why I’m here today, because for it to triumph I need you, Kyra.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” she said. “I’m with you. I always have been. Until now I haven’t been able to follow my own way. I’ve been helping my brother with his. But as soon as I finish what I came to do and my family is safe, you can count on me. I’ll join the cause.”

“I’m delighted to hear you say that. It’s excellent news.”

Kyra raised her finger in warning. “But I’m just speaking for myself. My brother doesn’t share my views.”

“I know,” the stranger said. “Perhaps one day he’ll change his mind and join us.”

“I doubt it, although I know he’ll help us if necessary.”

“And what about you two?” he asked Karm and Honus. “Will you join the cause?”

“You can count on me,” Karm said with absolute conviction. “There’s nothing I’d like more. It’s why I came here. It’s time to fight for freedom, or

else die for the dream if necessary."

"Hmm… I don't know," said Honus. "I just wanted to get out of that infernal mine. And what with all this fuss, I haven't had time to think. But if Karm joins, I guess I will too." His voice was gruff. "Although let's be clear about one thing, I'm not thinking of dying."

"Very well," said the stranger. "As Romen's group has been discovered and killed, you're now part of it."

"Let's hope we're luckier than they were," Honus muttered.

"Let's hope so," Romen agreed heavily.

"Right, then," Kyra said. "Now will you help me kidnap that bastard of a surgeon?"

The stranger leaned back and stretched his back and shoulders. "Tell me what you need, and I'll see what we can do for you."

Miratos, Sesmok's Personal Surgeon, was sitting on his luxurious bed waiting impatiently. He had had a terrible day at the Regent's palace, and now, free from his obligations and back at his own rich mansion, all he wanted to do was give in to the pleasures of life and forget about it. He poured himself a glass of wine to make the wait more bearable.

"Every day he gets more paranoid and unhinged," he told his parrot, and immediately regretted it.

"You heard nothing," he hastened to say.

"Nothing," the bird repeated.

"That's my boy."

The last thing he needed was to fall out with Sesmok because of the indiscretion of a parrot. He thought of getting rid of the bird, but looking at the huge room filled with exotic exuberance, he dropped the idea; it went well with the decoration. After all, what was the good of being one of the

most powerful men among the Senoca if he could not even have a parrot to turn to?

He drank from his silver cup and sighed. Sesmok had called him to the palace urgently in mid-morning. Luckily, or rather for the Regent's convenience, Miratos' villa was next to the palace. Sesmok had asked for his services because of a bout of migraine. In fact it had been brought on by Lord Hunter Osvan and Svariz, the Commander-in-Chief of the Guard, who had come back with bad news about the Heroes. Miratos had needed to work wonders to alleviate it.

He took another sip of wine. *It's no fun treating a migraine when the patient's yelling at his two men of trust like one possessed,* he said to himself. *I can't understand why he gets so upset about two farmers he hasn't managed to catch. He threw a tantrum and was yelling out that peasant girl's name like a madman: Kyra! Kyra! Kyra! Bring me Kyra! Kyra! Kyra! The halfwit! He nearly deafened us all.*

In any case, that was none of Miratos' business. He was a Surgeon. Politics and all the other concerns of Regents and Gods failed to interest him as long as he was able to enjoy all the pleasures he fancied.

After all, there isn't a more intelligent man in the whole Boundary, or one who knows his own field better, than your humble servant.

"And no, I'm not modest. I know that."

"Modest," the parrot repeated.

Miratos laughed. "How could I get rid of you when you make me laugh so much? I think I'll ask them to bring me another one like you."

His eyes fell on the silken sheets of the bed, the velvet cushions in soft tones. He would shortly enjoy a night of lust and pleasure the way he liked them, until dawn. He had sent Autas, his loyal old servant, to find him someone new and exotic. *I hope he finds me something worthy of my discerning palate. He's been rather a disappointment lately.*

Two knocks on the door caught his attention. Autas came into the room at his signal and bowed deeply.

"Have you brought me what I asked you to?"

"Indeed, my lord." Autas stood aside to make way for two guards, who were escorting a young girl.

Miratos smiled and moved forward to check the quality of the “dessert” he was about to taste. The girl was dressed in transparent silks which allowed all her charms to be glimpsed. He noticed at once her pretty figure, lithe and well-molded. He liked that. He was attracted to sensuous, well-rounded young women. He walked around her as he sipped his wine, taking a good look at her.

“I like her, Autas. I won’t need to whip you today for your incompetence.”

“Thank you, my lord,” the servant replied with an exaggerated bow.

“Although I might have you whipped anyway, just to keep you motivated.”

“Yes, my lord,” Autas said dejectedly.

“Now then. Out with you all, I want to start enjoying myself.”

The door closed, leaving Miratos alone with the young prostitute. His gaze focused on the girl once again; her eyes were the color of rubies, very intense in the candlelight, her long curly hair the color of fire.

“You’re not excessively pretty, but I find that fiery air of yours very intriguing, and I like your body. I have a feeling we’re going to spend a magnificent night.”

“I certainly agree,” said Kyra, and knocked Miratos out with a powerful right hook.

A few moments later she was shaking him ruthlessly by the shoulders. “Wake up, you oversexed slug.”

“What…? Where…? What happened?”

She held the surgical blade in front of his eyes, then touched it to his Adam’s apple and pressed.

“Not a sound, or else I’ll cut your throat.”

“What… what do you want?”

“We’re going for a walk, you and me. If you try anything stupid, it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

“I don’t understand… what do you want? Don’t you know who I am?”

“I know very well who you are, you pervert. Your fame in the brothels of this city goes before you.”

“I won’t touch you, I swear. You can leave. I’ll pay you whatever you want, but don’t hurt me.”

“I don’t want your money, you reptile.”

“Then, what do you want of me?”

“I’ll tell you. And I’m only going to say it once, so listen carefully, because your life’s at stake.”

Miratos’ staring eyes betrayed his terror as Kyra explained the plan to him.

A few moments later he called Autas. When the servant appeared, he bowed to his master.

“Did you call, my lord?”

“Bring me my surgical case. I have to go to the Regent urgently.”

Autas glanced at Kyra out of the corner of his eye, then nodded.

“Of course, my lord.”

“Now let’s go,” Miratos said. He began to walk towards the door.

Kyra pressed the blade against the Surgeon’s back. “Stop.”

Miratos obeyed.

“We’re not going out by the door. I like risk, but not that much.”

The Surgeon looked at her blankly.

“I made you call him so your guards wouldn’t suspect anything. But we’re going out by a different way. Isn’t that so, Autas?”

The old servant straightened and smiled from ear to ear. “Through the secret entrance,” he said, and pointed to the wall behind the parrot.

Miratos clenched his fists and turned crimson with rage. “Trai—”

Kyra put her hand over his mouth. There was a real threat in her voice as she whispered in his ear: “Autas decided to cooperate with us as soon as

we intercepted him at the brothel with the young lady he was sent to bring you. It wasn't hard to convince him."

"I'm delighted to help you. All that miser deserves is a painful death," Autas said. He spat at the Surgeon's feet.

Kyra applied pressure to the blade. "See? That's for abusing the helpless. You'll never hurt this old man again. Open up the passage, and don't make me have to say it twice."

Miratos turned, cursing to himself.

"You'll pay for this," he told Autas.

"No, they're going to hide me. It's already been sorted out. I'll never see your despicable face again."

Miratos growled with rage.

"The passage… or you'll have to be your own surgeon and stitch yourself."

A few hours later Kyra, together with Romen, Honus, Karm and her prisoner, met with the hooded stranger in a small grove on the outskirts of the city.

"The way's clear, but you'll have to hurry. They'll soon find out about the kidnap."

"We're leaving right away," Kyra said. "Get Miratos on a horse, and make sure he can't take the gag out."

Honus nodded. There was malice in his eyes. "Don't you worry, little one, I'll take charge of the Surgeon. If he so much as blinks, I'll break his legs."

Romen turned to the stranger. "Orders for my group?" He looked at Karm and Honus.

"Your orders are to accompany and protect the Hero."

Romen nodded solemnly. "We'll do that."

"Good luck, Kyra," the stranger said. "And my best wishes for your mother's recovery."

“Thank you… you haven’t told me your name.”

The stranger smiled. “In these lands I’m known as Gedrel.” He held out his hand to her.

Romen threw his head back in surprise, taken aback.

Kyra returned the old man’s smile and shook his hand firmly. “I already suspected. Ikai told me about you.”

“Give my regards to your brother. He’s a wonderful young man.”

“I will. Oh yes! One more thing, Gedrel.”

“What’s that, young lady?”

“Don’t start the rebellion without me,” she said with a wink.

Gedrel burst out laughing. “Don’t worry. I’ll wait for you.”

Chapter 21

Adamis watched the Enforcers working incessantly inside the huge underground chamber of the Secret Temple of Eret. The hollow hammering on walls, the chiseling of runes on domed ceilings, the dragging of blocks of rock and stone, all enveloped in a muffled echo, made up a dull, a-rhythmic melody which came to take over his mind. He recalled his father's words:

I, Laino, High King of the House of Eret, sentence you, Adamis, Prince Heir, to exile for an indefinite time. You will go to the Secret Temple of Eret on the continent and will supervise its construction, reporting to me on its progress. You will take the place of your cousin Atasos in his duties there.

The sentence had pierced his heart like an arrow with a four-angled tip.

This is my sentence. Let me hear you say you will observe it.

Adamis had raised his gaze to his father and replied: "I accept, and will observe it."

And although this was true, it hurt him to be here, in the center of the great continent, in this secret underground site where his father was building his great funerary temple: the place where he would come to rest for eternity, when the day should come. To build temples and secret chambers was a tradition among the Golden, or rather among the Great Houses. And it hurt, not because of being here, since it was considered an honor, and not because he was unable to go back to the Eternal City; it hurt because his father had not defended him, had not supported him.

Footsteps behind him made him turn.

"Impressive, is it not?" Atasos asked him, as he greeted him with an ivory smile.

"Indeed, cousin. You have done a magnificent job."

"I have been here for a hundred years. My predecessor was here another hundred, his predecessor for a hundred more, and the one who started the

work another hundred.”

“Are you trying to tell me something, cousin?” Adamis’ smile hid the sadness he was feeling.

“Yes: that we have been here for over four hundred years and the great project never seems to end. But now you are here, perhaps you will manage to finish it.”

“I shall do my best to do so. I do not really fancy spending a hundred years underground.”

Atasos gazed proudly around the hall. “It has been a real honor for me,”

“It is a great honor, cousin. My father only reveals this project to those he trusts completely. You will be well rewarded for your loyalty and excellent service.”

“Thank you, Adamis. I serve my House and my High King. That is all the reward I need.”

They moved to one side to make way for a group of servants who were carrying an enormous and ostentatious crystalline coffin of unusual beauty.

“They are raising the royal casket”

Adamis turned and studied the hall. “How many Enforcers work in the temple?”

“There are nearly a thousand here in the great funerary chamber, with about a hundred in the chamber below this one, the chamber which houses the portal. Working in the other chambers and sub-chambers at different levels, there must be about another two thousand or so.”

“An impressive display.”

“It is a funerary complex worthy of the greatest of kings, on a scale hitherto unseen. It will be decorated with the luxury of the Royal Palace, and every detail will be scrupulously tended to. Nothing less for my lord Laino, High King of the House of Eret.” Atasos finished his sentence with a deep bow.

Adamis could not understand the need to build something as grand as this, still less as a funerary temple. He understood the need for other underground constructions which his House had previously made on the continent, but not this one. Particularly because the more than three thousand servants who had worked on it would never leave it. They would

be sacrificed to guarantee the secret of its existence and its mode of construction. A short while ago he would never have stopped to consider this, but now, after meeting Kyra and having his eyes opened to the value of all life, this useless sacrifice seemed cruel to him. More than that: unpardonable. He sighed at the memory of Kyra… her accusing, vivid eyes, her fiery, uncontrollable temperament, her blazing hair… something inside him leapt when he thought of her. He felt a sweet emptiness in his chest which he longed to fill in some way but could not. Those bittersweet feelings puzzled him, since he had never experienced them before.

“Is it true?”

Adamis turned to Atasos, coming back from his thoughts.

“What is, cousin?”

“That the other Houses too are building temples for their High Kings.”

Adamis looked around to check that there was nobody near to hear them. “Yes, it is true. Our spies have confirmed it. We do not know where, it is top secret, but the others are building just as we are. The end of a long era is coming… the Five High Kings are preparing their final journey. They wish to withdraw and rest in those final days before the great voyage. And of course nobody and nothing must disturb that. It would be a gross revenge, a treachery out of all proportion. That is why it is essential that the existence of this temple is never found out.”

“But they still have long to rule,” Atasos said. His eyes were distant as he calculated the length of time that had passed.

“Not so long, cousin, not so long.”

Atasos lifted his arm and snapped his fingers, using some of his Power. “The time has come for me to leave,” he said, and five Eyes-of-the-Gods appeared at his call. Each carried a large marble-white volume under his arm. “These are the Scribes. They will bring you up to date with everything.”

“Very well. Go through the portal to the coast. My bodyguard Teslo will be waiting for you on a ship to take you back to Erandel. Make sure nobody traces you.”

“Of course. I hope and wish that your exile may be brief, and that we may meet again soon.”

“As do I. I shall wait here for my father’s summons. Teslo will come for me when the day arrives.”

The two cousins embraced one another.

“Good luck,” Atasos said, and turned to leave.

“The same to you.”

For weeks Adamis studied the details of the work with the Scribes: its current state, the amount of progress made, problems found and solutions adopted. The days flew by. Despite this, every day when he retired to rest a single thought lit up his mind: Kyra. She filled his thoughts and dreams. And the more he thought about her, the more he missed her and the more he longed to see her again. It was only now that he understood, now that he could no longer enjoy her company, how short the time they had spent together had been.

How my spirits would soar if I could find her beside me when I turned, with her bright eyes, with her intensity and commitment, with her staunch defense of all that is good, with her incessant fight against all that is unfair. But there was nothing he could do about it. His father had ordered him not to go near the slaves and to comply with the terms of his exile, and so he must. Under no circumstances could he disobey and betray his honor. *I am the Prince Heir, and I must behave as such.*

Trying in vain to put aside his thoughts of Kyra, he focused on his duty. The construction of the great complex was going well, and he was satisfied. *It is time to report on the progress.* He went down to the forbidden section of the temple. It had been the first to be built, and those who worked on it had died inside it to preserve the secret of what it contained. He went across to the round door and looked at the twenty-four golden runes carved along the edge. They were there to protect it. The chamber was sealed, and whoever tried to open it would die. *With the exception of the members of the Royal House of Eret.*

He placed his hand on the door and summoned his Power. From his palm issued a probe of energy which spread across the surface of the door as far as the outer symbols. The protective runes were activated and shone

with the gold of the Gods themselves. Adamis' body was bathed in their powerful radiance. The Prince closed his eyes and bit his lip while he bore the pain as best he could. If he had been an intruder, the pain would have grown stronger until it killed him. As he was a member of the Royal House, it dwindled and disappeared. The door slid to one side with a clang, and the chamber was revealed.

The door closed behind him. From the runes carved on the walls issued a faint golden light. The room was round, and in its center stood a translucent monolith which reached to the ceiling. He placed both hands on the smooth surface of the object of power. At his touch the monolith shone, and two golden circles first surrounded his hands, then began to rotate around them. He closed his eyes and began to interact with the powerful object. A low buzzing filled the chamber. Golden gleams issued from different levels of the monolith at indeterminate intervals. Symbols slid along its four crystalline surfaces. Finally came a great flash, accompanied by a loud boom, and a beam of golden light issued from the monolith.

He took a step back and watched the beam of light. From it emerged an image. At first it was blurred, but it became sharper until at last it formed a scene, not physically there yet so real he could almost touch it with his fingers. In another chamber, beside a very similar monolith, the figure of his Erudite Notaplo took shape.

"My Prince," Notaplo said, and bowed.

Adamis smiled broadly. "My dear Erudite."

"How glad I am to see you, my lord."

"I am still happier to see you, my old friend."

Notaplo smiled and nodded. "You must feel deeply lonely in your exile. You have no idea how much I regret all that happened. I should have taken the blame on myself."

"No, Notaplo, it was my responsibility and I must bear it, just like the punishment. Do not worry, it is not so bad. I have a lot to do, and time here in this underground level passes very quickly."

"It is not worthy of a Prince… Much less of my Prince and lord…"

"That is why my father chose it, to teach me a lesson in humility, I suppose… Is he coming?"

“No, my lord, I am sorry. I told him today was contact day, but he said he was too busy to attend something unimportant… I am sorry.”

His father’s attitude hurt him, although he had expected it. “I guessed he would not come. It is part of the punishment.”

“Perhaps in the next contact…”

“It will be in a year’s time, and I do not believe he will change his attitude.”

“The contacts must be few and brief, as you know, my lord, otherwise they might be intercepted by a rival House and the origin of the communication traced. They would find out where you are.”

“I understand. The same happens with the Portals. They must not be used directly. That is why we use ships.”

“So it is, my lord. Any precaution is too little in these times…”

“The security system which has been created is the right one, and I will respect it. I will not endanger this Temple. Now, tell me: is there any news?”

“Not very much. The Five High Kings are fighting behind the scenes to strengthen their power and position, as always happens during the High Cycles. There is no risk of open war for the moment, but friction is growing. Let us hope it does not end in a rupture that provokes a bloodbath.”

“Let us hope so… And your experiments: is there any progress?”

“Well, I find I have reached a crucial point.” Notaplo was clearly excited. “After analyzing and experimenting with the slave Marcus, the hybrid with power you found, I am on the brink of discovering what I could not find in the hybrid Arga: the key component that might be transferred to our own people and allow us almost infinite longevity. Marcus is the living proof that the passing of time can be slowed down. I am very close to taking a giant step for our civilization. I am on the verge of being able to preventing us from growing old, of making us into an immortal civilization!”

“That is amazing, Notaplo! If anyone can achieve it, you are the one. I have complete faith in your studies. Keep going. Never give up. You will make it! There is no mind more privileged among the Golden.”

“You are too generous, my lord. I am just an old erudite who enjoys studying and experimenting. But do not worry, as long as I have a drop of Power left I will go on with my studies and reach what our people have been pursuing for millennia.”

“Do you know anything about the fugitives? Have they been captured?”

“About Kyra?”

“Yes, about Kyra…”

“No, my lord. They have not been captured, and the High Kings are growing impatient. They wish to wipe away the stain the incident left on the honor of the Houses, and they are unhappy. They are demanding results and if they do not get them someone might act.”

“The High King of the House of Aureb. Am I right in my guess?”

“My lord is very rarely wrong. He has already made known his intention to act, if the incompetence of the High King of the House of Edan, the one responsible for that Boundary, continues.”

“He wants to ridicule a rival House and win Power. The stain on his honor is the excuse he needs.”

“Yes, and I very much fear that he will act soon if they are not captured.”

“Keep me informed, Notaplo. I will contact you in another year. If anything important should happen…”

“Do not worry, my Prince, I shall take care of your interests… And about our young friend: Kyra is special, very special… an extraordinary anomaly … we must take care of her, for it is in her and in those like her that the secret of our survival as a civilization lies.”

“Thank you, old friend.”

“There is one more thing, my lord.”

“Go ahead. There is little time left.”

“A disc has arrived… from Lord Asu… I was asked to show it to you when you made contact. Do you wish me to activate it?”

“If it comes from that jackal it cannot be anything good. I have not the slightest interest in hearing about him. But on the other hand if he wants me to see it, it must be for a reason… better to know what he is up to. Activate it.”

“Very well, my lord. I have taken precautions. The chamber is sealed and protected. He will not be able to trace the communication to the Temple.”

Adamis nodded and prepared himself mentally for what was coming.

Notaplo placed a disc on the floor beside the monolith and activated it. From the object charged with Power came Asu’s projected image, so real that Adamis blinked, believing he was facing him in person.

“How is exile treating you, Prince of Ether? Well, I hope.” There was a smile of venomous sarcasm on Asu’s disagreeable face. “I wanted to send you this friendly message. After all, there is no reason why our enmity should last forever.” The words said one thing, but Asu’s face showed marked disdain, and Adamis did not believe a word of what he was hearing. “I am offering you my arm in a sign of friendship,” Asu said with a slight bow, which greatly surprised Adamis. “And I wish the incident that occurred between us to be a thing of the past. For that I apologize humbly.”

Adamis was dumbfounded. What was this treacherous viper planning? Asu would never apologize; he would sooner die than admit his fault. He gazed at the face of his rival and noticed the tight lips, the clenched jaw, the eyes glaring with contained rage, the face a mask of malice.

Asu rounded off his bow with an elaborate gesture and straightened defiantly. “This formal apology, although private, has been imposed on me. I say this because I can imagine the surprise on your face. It was not my idea. It is part of the punishment that my father the High King of the House of Aureb has commanded.”

Then Adamis understood. It could not have been Asu’s will, of that he was certain. “My dear father” (Asu went on) “wants to prevent this situation from escalating between our Houses, and I find myself obliged to apologize. Also publicly, before your father and the nobles of your House.”

The image blinked, and Asu vanished for a moment. Notaplo and Adamis looked on uncertainly. It stabilized, and Asu appeared again, wearing different clothes.

“Now that I have got rid of my lord father’s punishment, I have one last thing to tell you, Adamis. I hope you appreciate it. I want you to know that I am going to get the slave girl you stole from me for myself, the one who is your favorite and whom you helped escape. I want you to know that I

intend to use all the means in my power to make her mine, and when I have her I will make her pay for her dishonor and your treason, many times over. She will suffer in such a way that her screams will be heard in all the seas that are known. I will not rest until she is mine, until she pays a thousand times in blood and suffering. She is mine, and she will be mine again. So enjoy your exile knowing this: she will soon be in my power, and do not worry… when I have her you will be the first to hear her scream." Asu began to laugh, and his laughter was heavy with hate and malice. The image blinked again and vanished, leaving behind only the macabre laughter.

Moments later the disc burst into flames and was consumed.

Notaplo stepped back and tripped, he almost fell.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, my prince, I am fine. Such scares at my age… not good… not good at all. But now I am worried about Kyra. That wicked Golden will not cease in his evil intent…"

"I know, Notaplo. This threatening message has left me very worried. I have to think what I should do… Thank you for everything."

"Always at your service, my Prince."

Adamis turned to look at the closed door of the chamber. *Kyra is in danger of death, and I am buried in this mausoleum.* A feeling of violent unrest came over him. *I have to do something. I cannot let Asu capture her.*

In the Eternal City, in an underground chamber of the Royal Palace of the House of Aureb, of the Second Ring, Lord Asu felt a tingle creep across the back of his neck. He concentrated, searched for the trace of Power and smiled when he recognized it.

"That bastard Adamis has received my message," he murmured, and began to laugh with pure satisfaction. "How I wish I could have seen that moron's face." His laughter bounced off the polished red walls of the three-sided pyramidal chamber. The silver runes of the walls reflected his laughter with a gleam.

“Is anything wrong, my lord and master?” Moltus asked. He was manipulating the red monolith of knowledge. A ring of golden light ran throughout the surface of the object until it merged with the upper vortex of the pyramid and disappeared sixty feet above.

Asu turned to his ancient, decadent Erudite. The truth was that the man’s mere presence made his stomach turn. He was so decrepit that he was forced to lean on a jeweled staff. The copper-gold of his shriveled skin and the silver hair which fell half-way down his back left a sense of disgust in Asu, which was only surpassed by what he felt at the sight of Moltus’ face, with those icy-blue eyes and the horrible burn on his right temple.

Shaking off his distaste, he said: “Nothing that concerns you. Is everything ready for the experiment you have told me about? Patience is not exactly one of my virtues.”

“My powerful lord, after eight hundred years of devoted search, the voices tell me I am going to achieve it. We shall attain immortality. We shall manage to restore the essence of life which was stolen by the Power from our bodies. The voices confirm it, and they know, my Prince and master.”

“You and your voices! You are nothing but a fool!”

“I assure you I have done it. The voices do not lie. We shall obtain essence of life to restore what was consumed by the Power, and you will be able to use as much Power as you wish, without fear. You will be the most powerful of all, and nobody will be equal to you.”

“By the Fire! You had better grant me what you promise, or you will suffer the most tortuous of deaths!”

“But… my lord… I live to serve you…”

“You have exhausted my patience, you old fool! Give me what I want!”

Iradu’s voice sounded behind him. “Did you call, my lord?”

Asu turned to his Champion, who had arrived with Oskas, his Master-Spy. Beside the gigantic, imposing presence of Iradu, Oskas, even though he was an Enforcer of great physical strength, looked like a mere slave. But the sinister figure, always dressed in black and wearing the Helmet of Oblivion, gave off a lethal aura. *Here they come: the strength and power of the best warrior among all the Golden, and the intelligence and somber arts*

of the best of my Enforcers. One could not ask for better company, and they are faithful to me, by obligation and by fear. Asu smiled in satisfaction.

“Yes, I want you to witness this. According to the result this fool of an Erudite has obtained, I have plans for both of you.”

“Very well, my lord,” Iradu said, and folded his muscled arms over his powerful torso. Oskas made a brief bow and said nothing.

“Very well. Go ahead, Moltus. And you had better not disappoint me.”

Moltus smiled timidly and clapped his hands twice. Three of his disciples came at his call, dragging a terrified slave with them.

“Give her the reactive,” Moltus ordered. Excitement glittered in his eyes as his body bent over his staff. “I have made it stronger.”

The slave was forced to drink the dark potion from a crystalline phial. A moment later she began to convulse, so that they had to hold her firmly. Her eyes turned completely black.

“She is ready,” said Moltus, who was watching her carefully.

He placed a disc with two silver circles on her forehead, and there was a metallic snap. The object divided in two, and the upper part began to rotate while the rune flashed at intervals. Black veins began to appear on the young slave’s face. She stiffened, looking upwards with her arms stretched out behind her and her mouth open. The black veins spread from her face through her neck, then to the rest of her body, until it was completely corrupted.

The disc stopped. The slave fell dead.

Moltus removed the disc and studied the two circles. Letting his staff drop, he raised his arms in the air and gave an abandoned cry. “Golden! The circles have turned golden! I did it! The voices knew it! I did it!”

Asu took the disc from the Erudite’s hand and contemplated it in astonishment.

“Golden…” he muttered in disbelief. Could it be? Had it really absorbed the essence of life of a slave who had not been selected? Had this lunatic really attained what he had pursued for so long?”

“The voices knew! I have made the greatest discovery of all times! We will be immortal!” Moltus was shaking with ecstasy. His assistants ran to grab him to prevent him from falling in his enthusiasm.

“Get him to calm down!” Asu snapped. He was now very nervous and excited. The implications of this success, if such it was, were unthinkable. The whole established order would change. And he would reach the peak from which he would rule the world.

Iradu rushed to the Erudite and seized him by the shoulders. The disciples moved back.

“I did it, my lord…” Moltus repeated. He was exhausted by now.

“Do you mean to say you have found the way to obtain vital essence, and so manage to regenerate all the Power my body consumes?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Will I be able to use all the Power in me without fearing the consequences, without being consumed, without aging prematurely and dying? Will I be able to obtain vital essence from all the slaves? Think well before you answer, and do not lie to me or Iradu will tear your head off.”

“You will, my lord. The voices say that now you will be able to harvest slaves, extract the essence of life and restore your Power. It will be infinite – as long as there are slaves, of course…”

“I cannot believe it!” Asu was euphoric. “Nobody will be able to oppose me, nobody! Today is the day in which the destiny of this civilization, of this world, will change forever! Today is the day I become a God!”

The others remained silent, trying to come to terms with the discovery and its crucial importance.

Asu laughed with his whole being. *Unlimited power. There will be no way of stopping me. I shall rule over this and all worlds.*

“How is the essence of life to be transferred to my body?”

Moltus straightened and tilted his head to one side. “The process has not been validated, my lord… never before have we been successful.”

“We shall validate it now!”

“Very well, my lord, but not on you yourself. The voices say it is dangerous… possibly fatal…”

Asu felt impatience devouring his chest. “You,” he said, pointing at one of Moltus’ disciples. “You will validate it.”

The disciple nodded, his face twisted by fear. He lowered his head.

“Put the Claw on him,” Moltus said.

From a silver container the other two disciples took out a golden bracelet five fingers across, with a clasp in the shape of a claw. They put it over the disciple’s right wrist. On the upper part of the bracelet a circle had been engraved.

“The disc, my lord,” Moltus said.

Asu handed it to one of the disciples.

“The voices say the moment has come.”

The disciple placed the disc over the circle of the bracelet, where it fitted perfectly. The claw closed on the wrist. From its nails emerged five pins which buried themselves in the flesh. The disciple groaned, but said nothing. The disc flashed and divided into two. The upper part began to rotate, gleaming as it did so. Black veins began to appear in the arm. Very soon the whole arm had turned black as far as the shoulder, reaching the neck and then the face.

“Do you feel the essence?” Moltus asked his disciple.

“Yes, my lord, I feel it… my source of power is restored… but…argh… something… is not right…” The disciple fell to the ground and began to tremble uncontrollably. They held him firmly, but he went on shaking and finally he lost consciousness.

“Is he alive?” Asu asked.

The disciples examined him, “Yes, my lord, he is alive, for now.”

“It is a reaction of the organism, similar to a poisoning,” Moltus explained.

“If it is similar to a poisoning,” Asu said, “you can create an antidote, something that will allow me to counter the noxious effect.”

“Yes, my lord, the voices say there is no doubt.”

“How long will it take?”

“Not long, I think. I shall experiment with the disciples.”

“Iradu, stay with him, get him everything he needs. This is vitally important. There is nothing more so. Is that clear?”

Iradu glanced at Moltus out of the corner of his eye. “Yes, my lord.”

“Oskas, I have a new task for you.”

“Always at your service, my Prince.”

“It is a mission that requires your special skills. You must get me something I crave fervently.”

“I will get it for you, have no doubt about that.”

Asu grinned. What a wonderful day this was.

I shall dominate the Golden, and then I shall dominate the world.

Chapter 22

Ikai bent down to drink from the stream. They had been traveling at a forced march all day, and he was desperately thirsty. The Witch of the Lake's potion swung from his neck. He reached for the phial, then for the pendant his sister had given him, the sea horse she had carved for him. He always wore it, as she wore hers.

How I wish I could tell you we're coming, that I've got the medicine to save Mother. Don't worry, I'm already on my way back.

"Back to thinking about a certain Captain I know?" Albana asked as she filled the water-skin.

"You know perfectly well I'm not," he protested. "What happened between Liriana and me is already forgotten. It's just a memory of a moment in a long-gone place and time."

Her smile was wide and malicious. "Are you sure of that, Hunter of Hearts?"

"Of course I am!"

Her previous comment had stung, but this one was much worse. Reminding him of his old job in the service of the Gods, something which shamed him no end, was a low blow. Albana's biting wit always hit its target, with a scalding lash. That tongue of hers, full of irony, always ready to bite when it was least expected, was another of her exceptional skills. The brunette's witty, ever critical comments had chastised him since they had first met in the Dungeons of Oblivion. "And anyway, remember she's with her fiancé," he retorted.

"Yeah… it would be interesting to see good old Maruk's face if he found out…"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Sure I would, and you know it," she replied, laughing, and deliberately splashed him.

“You’re impossible!” said Ikai, and splashed her in return.

They both laughed, splashing each other like children who had been given permission to play after a very long punishment.

They ended up lying in the sun on the grass, panting, happy for the first time in a very long while.

“We’ll make it,” she assured him.

“We have to.”

“Will you keep the deal with the Witch?”

He looked down at the tree tattooed on his arm. “Yes… I gave her my word. If the potion saves my mother, I’ll honor my word.”

“Don’t. I wouldn’t. If there’s one thing I’ve learnt in this life it’s that you can’t trust anybody. They’ve all got some hidden motive for lying, betraying and killing. That Witch is no different. She wants something from you, and I have a feeling that it’s bad news. Believe me.”

“I believe you. I don’t trust her, but I gave her my word and I’ll keep it. And not all of us have a hidden motive. I’d never betray you. And I’m not after anything from you.”

She laughed. “That’s because you’re an idiot who doesn’t learn from his mistakes!”

“However much you tease me – and you do that the first chance you get – you won’t make me angry at you. I’m not going to let you have it all your own way.”

Albana laughed even more. “Let me remind you, Hunter, that not so long ago you couldn’t even stand being with me and wanted to get rid of me at all costs.”

“That was before, before I knew what you’re really like, before I could decide whether to trust you or not… And let me tell you, you’ve more than earned it. Or do I have to remind you that you’ve already betrayed me, not once but twice?”

“That’s because you’re gullible. Your heart’s too big, and you need to get a bit sharper.”

Ikai laughed with her. He knew she was right. Still, what he had lived through had opened his eyes to the cruelty of both Gods and unscrupulous men. *I’m no longer so gullible, or so good-hearted.* Evil had scratched his

soul with its poisoned claws, and now he'd never be the person he used to, however much he might wish he was. *Life, experience and suffering: they change you.* He hoped it would all be for the better.

They relaxed, enjoying a peaceful interlude which Ikai's soul gave thanks for as if he were being refreshed by the water of the stream. They ate from their supplies and rationed what was left, since they could not waste time hunting.

Albana checked the contents of the satchel. "There's barely enough for one more day," she said.

"Isaz will get us supplies from his village, Three Rivers. He'll soon be back with them. We'll get there, don't you worry."

"It's a bit risky. Isaz's a wanted man, particularly in his village, after what he did to the Proxy…"

"He told me he can still count on friends who'll help him. Besides, he wanted to visit his sister's tomb. Who knows when he'll have another chance?"

"Yeah… I guess so…"

Ikai nodded thoughtfully.

"Where's Isaz meeting us?"

"At the Cave of Farewell."

"Funny name for a place. Was it always called that, or is it the name that stuck after we all said goodbye and left the Boundary to set up the Shelter?"

"I don't know what to say… We all call it that. For me it's the cave where Maruk freed our people from the Rings. I didn't think he could do it, but he did, and we were able to escape. My mother was able to cross."

"Yes, it's a hidden, symbolic place. Although I think we should find another spot to cross."

"Why do you say that? We always cross there. It's safe. Nothing's ever happened to us."

"That's exactly why. You, Kyra, Liriana, the others… too many people always crossing at the same point. I'm not happy about that."

"You could be right. I'll think about it…"

They went on with their journey, and Ikai thought about what Albana had said. As always the cat-like brunette was walking a couple of steps ahead of him, as though making a path for him, as if protecting him so that no enemy could reach him. He would have liked to go first, since after all he had been a Hunter, but as far as Albana was concerned that was so much nonsense.

“I’m a better tracker and fighter than you are, and don’t make me prove it,” she had replied with a glare when he had made the suggestion. “And if you dare mention the fact that I’m a woman, I’ll give you my fist to swallow.”

That had put an end to any discussion. Albana went first, clearing a path, and he accepted the fact willingly. They went on all day without stopping to rest again. Night was beginning to fall when she leapt on to some rocks and looked out to the east.

“Hurry up,” she said, and gave him her roguish smile. “You’re like a snail. I can see the cave.”

They made haste. Ikai heaved a sigh of relief when he recognized the rocky formation. Once in the cave they would be safe, and from there to the Boundary it was no more than five hundred paces. He looked behind him, fearful he might find a group of Executors or Hunters on their trail, but there was only tall grass and scrub.

Suddenly Albana stopped, crouched and readied her bow. Ikai followed her example. She raised a finger, then pointed at the entrance to the cave. He understood. She slipped noiselessly to the left of the entrance. He moved towards the right, somewhat more heavily. They tensed their bows.

But nobody peered out. Could Albana have been mistaken? *No, she’s never wrong about these things. She has an extra sense when it comes to detecting danger, or maybe a skill she’s learned… Whatever it is, she’s never wrong.* He waited, because it was the only logical thing to do. And the wait bore fruit when a silhouette loomed out among the shadows of the cave-mouth. He prepared to release an arrow before they were discovered.

Albana raised her fist. Ikai thought in surprise: *They’re going to see us!*

And the silhouette came out into the light: the figure of a strongly-built woman.

“Urda!” he muttered.

She looked at Albana, then at Ikai. Albana made an enquiring gesture.

“I’m alone,” Urda said. “Don’t worry, there’s no danger.”

Ikai sighed with relief. They went up to the cave and hugged her warmly.

“What are you doing here?” he asked in puzzlement. “Has anything happened at the Shelter?”

Urda sighed.

“There’s a lot to tell you, Ikai, and you’re not going to like it. We’d better go into the cave.”

“Kyra?”

Urda nodded grimly.

Ikai rolled his eyes. “Let’s go inside. Tell me everything.”

Urda told them what had happened to Solma, then about Kyra’s idea.

“… and they left me behind. I tried to follow as fast as I could. My plan was to reach the city and join them there to help them with the kidnap. But while I was trying to go faster than I could really manage, I tripped and twisted my ankle. It was a bad sprain, and it’s still a bit swollen. I’m big, and clumsy with it! Hell!” She shook her head in real distress. “I had to turn back, and I stayed here to wait for them. They’ll have to come this way. It’s the route we always use.”

Ikai swore. He was getting more worried all the time.

“Don’t blame her, Ikai,” Albana said. “She didn’t know whether we’d get back, and time was pressing.”

Urda nodded. “We didn’t have much of a choice. And asking Kyra to stay put, watching Solma die, was asking the impossible.”

“I know that, I know you’re right, but suppose something’s happened to her? Suppose she’s been captured? We’ve got the medicine now.”

“And we’re not absolutely sure it’ll work,” Albana put in.

Ikai tried to stay calm and think. He went outside, where night had already fallen. *I have to get to Mother and save her. Now more than ever, knowing her condition’s worse. I can’t risk it. Kyra will have to make it on her own. I’m sure she can. I’m sure she will.* He looked up bitterly at the God Father Moon.

Girlai, protect my sister, don't let anything happen to her, he begged the husband of the Goddess Oxatsi.

"There's nothing else you can do today," Albana said, "either for your mother or your sister. We have to rest, get our strength back and go on at dawn."

Darkness was swallowing the landscape. Ikai nodded.

"You're right. We'd better rest. It's still a long way to the Shelter."

Urda gestured towards the cave. "I'll make a fire inside, where it won't be visible from outside," she said, and limped away to gather timber.

"Everything'll be all right," said Albana with a wink. In the silence their eyes locked. They neither moved nor spoke, her black eyes fixed on his ill-matched ones, sharing a common intensity, heavy with feelings and emotions. They took no notice of the night breeze and its caress, trapped in a moment they hoped would not break.

At last Albana sighed, and the moment vanished. "Do you know you have the eyes of a madman? One blue, the other green." She did not take her eyes off his.

"And do you know you have a very loose tongue?"

She winked at him, giggled and went to help Urda.

Ikai watched her go, with her sensuous, cat-like walk. How things had changed between them. There had been a time when he had hated her… *But now… everything's different. Now, every morning when I see her my spirit soars. I feel happier, more optimistic, even with her constant attacks, her wild, untamable nature. When she's with me I feel more sure of myself. Being with her makes me better, and I don't want night to come and separate us. I don't know why, but that's how it is. And I feel it growing stronger all the time.*

An hour later, the three of them were enjoying the warmth of the fire. While they finished their supplies of food, Ikai told Urda what had happened with the Witch of the Lake.

"I'll take the first watch," Albana said. Ikai did not know what to make of her enigmatic smile. *Does it mean friendship? Fondness? Something more?* No, it couldn't be anything more than that. That was his imagination. She was only being a good companion. She watched him for a moment longer and smiled again, almost tenderly this time, then she was gone. *And*

that last smile? What did it mean? It was something… I'm going crazy! He shook his head and decided to forget about the whole business. He was too tired. He lay down by the pleasant warmth of the fire and was asleep, exhausted, almost before his eyelids had closed.

Sounds nearby brought him abruptly out of a deep sleep. He opened one eye with an effort and saw Albana talking to someone on the other side of the dying fire.

He struggled to his feet. "What… what's going on…?"

"Easy, Ikai, it's Isaz. He caught up with us."

Ikai half-closed his eyes and focused on the man's face. Immediately he recognized Isaz' smile and weathered features.

"I brought some food," he said, and showed them a satchel.

"Excellent," Ikai said. "And now why don't we all catch up with a bit of sleep?" All he wanted to do was go on resting.

Isaz did not have to be told twice. He lay down by the fire.

The morning cool and the dampness of the cave woke Ikai up with its unpleasant embrace. His body was stiff and sore. He stepped past Urda and Isaz, who were still asleep, and went outside. The sun was already climbing the horizon, tinting fields and forest with gold. He let the sunshine bathe him fully and warm his body. The feeling was so pleasant he could have stayed there for hours.

"Someone's coming!" came the warning. He turned in every direction, looking for the source. As if she had fallen from the sky, Albana appeared at his side.

"Eh? How…?"

"I was up there." She pointed to the top of the cave. "We're in trouble. Riders are on their way."

"How many?"

"Five."

"They must be Hunters, or maybe men of the Guard."

"Whichever way, we'll have to fight." she said, and left at a run. "Where are you going?" – but she had already disappeared along the side of the cave.

“Urda! Isaz! Grab your weapons!” Ikai shouted. He crouched at the right-hand side of the cave entrance, where a boulder gave partial cover, and took out an arrow. Urda went to the other side and did the same. Isaz hid in the shadows inside. The sound of galloping horses reached them more and more clearly.

“Get ready,” whispered Ikai as the first rider came into sight.

He drew his bow and aimed at the hooded figure galloping fast towards the cave. Another rider was beside him, with three more following a little behind.

Ikai turned to Urda and held up two fingers. They needed to take advantage of the surprise factor and bring down the first two before they were discovered. She nodded. Ikai pointed a finger at his chest, then two at Urda, who nodded again and aimed. The first two riders stopped their horses in front of the cave under a great oak with massive protruding roots. Ikai held his breath, concentrated and aimed at the first rider, leaving Urda to take down the second. Both riders looked back, but waited for the others instead of dismounting, it was the right moment.

Ikai was about to release his arrow when something caught his eye as the first rider turned. He narrowed his eyes until he recognized what he had glimpsed. A pendant… with a carving…of a sea horse!

“Urda, hold your fire!” he shouted in horror.

But a moment earlier she had let fly.

The shout alarmed the two riders, who turned. The arrow brushed by the head of the second. In an attempt to avoid it, he fell off his horse and hit the ground with a muffled cry.

“Romen!” Kyra cried, and ran to him, taking cover behind her horse.

Ikai got to his feet. “Don’t shoot, it’s Kyra! Don’t shoot!”

Urda and Isaz lowered their weapons in amazement.

Ikai ran to his sister. “Kyra, it’s us!”

She turned to see her brother running towards her. Spreading her arms wide, she stared at him incredulously.

“You almost killed us!” she protested.

“Where the hell are you going on horseback and hooded? What are you doing here?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she said and went across to Romen, who was still lying on the ground unmoving.

“Is he dead?” asked Ikai.

“I don’t think so. The arrow just grazed him. It’s not fatal, but he must have hit his head when he fell. He’s unconscious.”

Ikai gasped with relief. “Thank goodness for that!”

Kyra looked at the biggest of the three other riders. “Honus, could our good surgeon tend to Romen? It looks as though we’re going to need his services sooner than we thought.”

“I’ll make sure he does, with pleasure,” Honus said. He gave Miratos’ back a massive slap, and the surgeon could not even protest for the pain.

“I’m so sorry,” Urda said as she reached them.

Kyra fell on her massive friend and threw her arms around her. “Urda! I’m so glad to see you!”

“We thought you were Hunters, or the Guard,” Urda said. She lifted Kyra off the ground in a bear-hug. “How did you get hold of horses?”

“And who are these people?” Ikai asked.

“Don’t frown like that, brother, they’re friends.” She hugged her brother affectionately and kissed his cheek. “Gedrel got us the horses. He’s a man of resources. He sends you his greetings. That giant there is Honus, and the other one is Karm. They’re fugitive miners, Pariahs, and they helped me kidnap Miratos.” She indicated the Surgeon, who was already tending to Romen amid much grumbling, though the presence of Honus nearby forced him to keep his voice down.

Ikai shook his head. “I can’t believe you did it.”

“Well, you’ll have to think again. And what about you? Did you get it?”

Ikai nodded and showed her the phial round his neck.

“That’s wonderful! We’ve got both options now. Mom will come through, one way or the other.”

“Or both ways,” Albana said as she appeared from behind a tree, bow in hand.

“Yes, or both,” Kyra admitted with a smile.

“So you were there?” Ikai said. There was a trace of reproach in his voice. The brunette had not told him of her plan beforehand.

“Of course. It was the best place for a clear shot,” she said, and the independence in her voice only irritated him further.

“I’m so glad to see you,” Kyra said, and threw her arms affectionately round her.

“I’m glad to see you’re still yourself and still following your instincts,” the brunette replied with a warm smile.

“Thanks. At least you approve, even if my brother certainly doesn’t.”

“That’s usually the case.”

The two girls turned their gaze to Ikai. He felt a desire to douse them with reproaches, but instead took a deep breath and let it pass.

Isaz came towards them with a smile. “I’m happy to see you in one piece too, young hero,” he said.

Kyra greeted him with a smile and a small bow.

“By Mother Sea Oxatsi!” Karm said all at once, and leapt off his horse. “I never thought this day would come, not in a hundred lifetimes.” He drew a long hunting knife from his belt and moved forward.

They looked at him in puzzlement. The hood of the cloak he was wearing partially hid his face.

“What are you talking about, Karm?” Kyra asked.

“Every day and every night I’ve prayed to our mother goddess that one day I might find justice. I never thought I’d see that day. I’d lost all hope, but Oxatsi has decided to grant me my wish, my revenge.”

Ikai tensed at the sound of the words and the sight of the knife. He drew his short sword as Karm came forward.

Honus did not understand what was happening. “Karm, what on earth…?”

Karm came up to Kyra and Ikai, who stepped in front of his sister to protect her and raised his sword in warning. Karm ignored them completely and went on, with his eyes fixed on Isaz.

He stopped in front of the tracker, who was watching him with his head to one side, trying to make out his face under the hood.

“Don’t you recognize me, you murderous scum?” Karm asked.

Isaz shook his head. “You must have mistaken me for somebody else.”

“No, I’m not mistaken. I know very well who you are, Isaz of Three Rivers, you treacherous snake, you heartless vermin, liar, and above all, murderer.”

Karm threw the hood back. Isaz’s face lost all color, as though he had seen a ghost from the past coming back from the tomb. He opened his mouth to speak, but could only stammer: “You… you… it can’t be…”

“What’s going on here? What are these accusations?” Ikai asked in confusion.

Isaz had recovered a little from the shock by now. He stepped back and looked at Ikai. “It’s him … Karm, who killed my sister in Three Rivers.”

“I killed your sister? You say *I* killed her?” Karm cried.

Isaz’s face was distorted and his eyes glared with rage. “You killed her, you swine! And you’ll pay for that!” He drew his hunting-knife.

Ikai took a step towards them. “Stop, both of you!” he ordered.

“I’m going to gut this murderous, lying swine,” Karm cried, and lunged at Isaz.

There was determination in Isaz’ eyes as he brandished his knife. “You killed my sister. Get ready to die.”

“Stop!” Ikai shouted. He recalled what Isaz had told them about his terrible past.

But it was too late. Karm’s knife stabbed towards his opponent’s heart. Isaz stepped aside, and the knife just missed his ribcage. He counterattacked with a blow to the neck, but Karm threw his body back and turned his head. He felt the cold sharp edge cut his chin.

“Stop it!” Kyra shouted. “Both of you! Right now!”

Karm launched two fierce cuts at Isaz’s face, but he dodged them by stepping to one side. He tried another feint to the chest, but Isaz deflected it with his forearm. Taking advantage of his position, he lunged at Karm and caught him in the ribs. He doubled up in pain and took up a defensive position.

At that moment Ikai threw himself on Isaz, pulled him down and pinned him to the ground. “Stay still, Isaz, don’t kill him,” he said.

Karm took two steps forward and made ready to finish Isaz as he lay there. But Kyra stepped between them. “No, Karm! Don’t!”

He glanced at her, but in his eyes there shone a murderous fury. He tried to take a step, but Kyra hit him in the face with all her strength, and he toppled.

“Honus, hold your friend back before there’s a tragedy,” she said.

Honus hastened to Karm’s side and helped him to his feet. “What the hell are you doing?”

Karm said nothing. His eyes were still on Isaz, who was getting up with Ikai’s help.

Albana came to stand between the two men with her hands on her hips.

“Well now,” she said, looking first at one and then at the other. “It looks as though we have a serious dispute to settle…”

“Isaz told us what happened in Three Rivers,” Ikai said. “Karm must be lying.”

“I didn’t lie,” shouted Karm. “That swine made the Enforcers execute my sister!”

“That’s a filthy lie,” Isaz shot back. “It’s exactly the other way around. It was my sister they executed, just because this unscrupulous bastard was a sore loser.”

Albana studied both men. “We have an interesting dilemma here. One of you is lying, but which?”

Kyra turned to Honus. “You know him well. Is what he’s saying true?”

Honus’s eyes were on his friend. “We’ve spent years in the mines, we’re outlaws, I can tell you that much. I can assure you he’s the best man I know, I can vouch for that. But he’s never told me about his past. It’s something I’ve always known tormented him, but he never said a word about it and I respected his privacy. So I couldn’t tell. But if I had to bet on which of them is telling the truth, I’d bet my life on him.”

There was a silence.

“That’s not fair,” Isaz protested. “I’ve got no-one here to defend me.”

“You have us,” said Ikai. “You’ve been at the Shelter for a while. I trust you.”

“Isaz is one of us, that’s true,” said Kyra, “but it’s also true that Karm’s helped me on several occasions… and he could have turned me over to the Guard. I don’t know…”

“Who’s telling the truth and who isn’t?” Albana said. Her almond eyes were half-closed. “If there’s one thing life’s taught me, it’s that you can never trust anybody. For that reason I don’t believe either of them.”

“How do we sort this out, then?” Kyra asked.

“I think there’s something more here than meets the eye,” Albana said.

“What do you mean?”

“One of them isn’t telling the truth… but how is it possible that they’re both with us now? Coincidence? Really? One of them isn’t who he says he is, and happens to come across us, four of the Heroes? The most wanted individuals of all? I don’t believe it’s just coincidence. There aren’t many of those, and the most logical explanation is usually the right one.”

“A spy?” Ikai asked. He too was thinking about the possibility of a secret betrayal.

Albana nodded vehemently. “One of them’s a spy, and very probably either has already betrayed us, or else is going to.”

Kyra was reluctant to accept this. “That’s impossible!”

“Albana’s right,” Ikai agreed. “It’s no coincidence that whichever of them’s lying is here among us. This is betrayal.”

“I can get the truth out of them, if you want me to,” Albana said to him.

He read what was in her eyes, and knew it was within her power.

“It won’t be pleasant, though…”

He bowed his head. “All right then, do it.”

“Let the Surgeon tend to the wounds first,” begged Kyra. Ikai nodded.

Afterwards they were tied to the oak, one on each side of the thick trunk so they could not see each other. Miratos was tending to Romen inside the cave, and Honus was watching both him and Albana from the entrance.

Kyra and Urda watched Albana in silence.

“This is your last chance,” she said. “Confess now and you might come out of this alive. Once I start, I won’t stop. And there won’t be any mercy.”

“I’m telling the truth,” said Isaz.

“I have nothing to fear,” said Karm.

Albana drew the black daggers, then with a whiplash movement of both arms threw them at the two prisoners. The daggers stuck in the oak, one finger’s-breadth from their heads. Their eyes widened in horror, and they stiffened. She concentrated and with an incantation, invoked her Power. With a turn of her wrist, she produced a thread of unnatural blackness from her hand. As if it were alive, it danced sinuously and silently, expanding like a mist of horror. The watchers were held, fascinated and aghast. The two prisoners, with growing unease, watched the approach of the mist, like a black adder searching for a prey to sink its fangs into. The mist swirled around their bodies and covered them completely, from head to toe. Isaz and Karm began to whimper with pain as their faces vanished into the darkness. Albana murmured under her breath, and the mist thickened. The moans turned to screams of real pain. The two of them yelled as if a thousand flesh-eating beetles were devouring them.

In a deep, serene voice Albana said to them: “The one who is telling the truth has nothing to fear. The pain will go very soon. The one who is lying, though, will suffer this torture until he dies.” She murmured a few words more, and the torture intensified. By now the cries of pain were unbearable.

Ikai and Kyra turned to her, but she took no notice. She raised her arm and gave another turn of her wrist. The screams stopped as if swallowed by the mist, but the suffering went on.

Amid a gloomy silence, the torture went on for an eternity. But now that they could no longer hear the two prisoners, it was impossible to tell which was crying and which was not.

Finally Albana raised both her arms and twisted her wrists.

They heard a cry: “Stop it! For the love of Oxatsi, by all that’s most holy, stop it!”

“Confess,” said Albana.

“I confess! It’s me! It’s me!”

Albana turned her wrists again and the sinister mist vanished, revealing the bodies of both men. They were unharmed.

Ikai went up to the oak and faced the culprit.

“You had my trust, my affection, so why? Why, Isaz?”

“I had no choice,” he said. He was sobbing with pain. “They gave me no choice.”

“Who are you spying for?”

“Torkem, Sesmok’s High Priest…”

“Free Karm,” said Ikai.

Honus hastened to set his friend free. Karm fell into his arms.

“What have you told them, you treacherous rat?” said Kyra.

“Who you are. Torkem ordered me to set up an ambush to catch you. They want to bring you to the capital alive, to make a public example out of you in the main square.”

“So the people can see the heroes die and know there’s no hope,” Albana commented.

Ikai drew his sword. “What else have you told them?”

“Nothing, I swear. I didn’t have a chance.”

“Do they know about The Shelter?”

“No. They know it exists, but not where it is.”

Ikai looked at Albana, who shook her head.

Kyra punched Isaz hard in the stomach. “You bastard!”

Karm stood up and turned to Ikai, “Will you grant me the justice I’ve been looking for, so that my sister’s soul may rest in peace?”

Ikai thought about it. He did not wish to kill this man, who had been his friend and his companion. But he was a murderer and a spy for the enemy, and he could not be left alive. He glanced at Albana, who nodded. He turned to Urda, who nodded in turn. Then he turned to Kyra.

“Grant him his justice,” she said.

Ikai turned to Karm, “I grant it to you,” he said, and offered him his sword.

“Nooo!” Isaz cried in desperation. “Have mercy!”

They left the spot, leaving Karm alone with Isaz. Inside the cave, Ikai said to the group: “I have a very bad feeling about this. We need to get to the Shelter as soon as we can.”

“Do you think that traitor might have told them where it is?” Kyra asked.

“Most likely.”

“In that case it won’t be there by the time we arrive,” said Albana. “The Enforcers wouldn’t lose a moment destroying it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” said Ikai bitterly.

“What are we waiting for, then?” said Kyra. “Let’s go!”

The sword pierced Isaz’s heart. The last thing his eyes saw was the four Heroes of the Senoca galloping away free.

Chapter 23

They marched without stopping. Ikai could feel an emptiness in his chest he could not get rid of. Isaz's betrayal had affected him deeply, and what was worse, left him with a fear for the lives of his mother and all the others at the Shelter.

"They'll be all right, don't you worry," said Albana, who was riding beside him.

Ikai spurred his horse. They were already going at a gallop along the sand of the endless beach. To his left Mother Oxatsi, in all her emerald splendor, followed them in this race against time.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

The sea breeze whipped his face and tousled his hair, and he felt a brief relief. He did not want to think the worst – his nature was not a pessimistic one – but it was the most logical conclusion… and he always let reason guide him. If Isaz had given them away, then Sesmok would destroy the Shelter and kill everyone in it.

"They have to be all right," said Kyra as she came up to them on her horse. His sister's flaming hair flew in the wind and her ruby eyes gazed fearlessly into the distance. Clinging to her waist was Miratos the Surgeon. Ikai wished with his whole soul that his sister was right, but his mind told him the opposite. He glanced over his shoulder. Further back Urda and Romen were sharing a horse, with Karm and Honus sharing the last mount.

"They're lagging further and further behind," said Albana. She too was watching them.

"Too much weight," Ikai said. He looked aside at his sister.

"Leave me behind. You two go on. I'll follow as soon as I can."

"We can leave him here and come back for him later," Ikai said, with a nod towards Miratos.

“No way!” Kyra said flatly. “This one’s coming with me. I’m not going to let him leave my side, not after all it took to get hold of him!”

Ikai calculated the distance. It was not far; they could make it by nightfall if the horses held out.

“All right, little sis. We’ll go ahead. Don’t run your horse to death.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Very well then. We’ll see you at the Shelter!”

“Good luck!” Kyra said. There was concern in her eyes.

Ikai nodded and spurred his horse. Albana followed at once, leaving Kyra and the rest of the group behind as they set off along the final stretch of beach.

It was almost nightfall when he recognized the island in the distance. They were following the coastline. They had left the huge beaches behind them and were now riding along rocky cliffs.

He pointed ahead. “We’re there!”

Albana had already glimpsed the Shelter. “I’m not sure these poor beasts will last the course.”

“They’ll have to,” said Ikai.

But he too had doubts. He did not know much about horses, which were a luxury reserved for Proxies, nobles and the Guard. As a Hunter he had been trained in their use and care, but all he really knew was how to ride, together with the basics of looking after them. He was pleasantly surprised at how well the two horses had held out. When they had been made to cross the Boundary he had thought they would die. But those noble steeds had recovered from the traumatic experience. It had been hard work calming them down when they came back to their senses after crossing. They had been terrified. But now they knew that horses could cross the Boundary, even at the expense of some trauma. *Necessity forces us to experiment and learn things we’d never imagined.*

They turned a bend, and the island was revealed. The tide was high, lapping against the imposing cliffs. Against an orange sky, with the sun

returning to the lap of Mother Sea, Ikai saw something which filled him with dread.

From the center of the island there rose a column of black smoke.

“Oh no!” he cried, and felt his worst forebodings had come true.

“It’s a big fire… and it’s coming from the village,” Albana said uneasily.

“No, no, no!” He cursed. The image of his mother and the other refugees, all dead amid an inferno of burning houses, came to his mind.

“The pass is underwater,” Albana said. “We’ll have to swim.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We have to help them.”

They reached the pass and dismounted. He was ready to dive into the water when Albana caught his arm.

“Wait!”

He turned.

“If we swim over we’ll be an easy target for whoever might be waiting for us on the other side.”

“I don’t care.” He pointed at the black smoke rising sky-high. “We’ve got to help them.”

“The Guard and the Hunters are waiting for us – or something worse, the Executors. It’s madness, Ikai, we have to think up a plan.”

“There’s no time, I must help them or else they’ll die… they’re my responsibility!”

Albana gazed at him, took his face in her hands and kissed him. She kissed him with a mixture of wild passion, tenderness and admiration. He felt an explosion of intoxicating feelings, and for an instant his senses swam.

“Go, but for Oxatsi’s sake, don’t let them kill you!”

“What about you?”

“I’ll take another route. We’ll have more chances that way.”

He nodded. He was about to dive into the water, but checked himself. He turned to her and kissed her, with unbridled passion, putting all the love, fire and anxiety he felt into that kiss. Then he leapt into the water.

He swam as if possessed. The anxiety for Solma’s fate and the rest of the refugees was eating him up from within. When he reached the island he

got to his feet and looked towards the watch-post: it was deserted.

Where the hell are the Arken brothers? Why is nobody on duty? This looks bad. He ran to the village, through forest and jungle. He went so fast that he tripped and stumbled several times, but managed to keep his balance and avoid falling. At the edge of the village he stopped. If he kept on he would come into the open and be seen. He crouched, then from his hiding-place in the underbrush watched the huge column of smoke. He could hear shouts and voices from the village. He narrowed his eyes to see more clearly, but the glare of a great fire momentarily blinded him. He opened and closed his eyes several times until he recovered from the glare.

And then he saw what was happening. A dozen houses in the center of the village were burning. The people were running everywhere, trying to put the flames out. But there was no sign of Guard, Hunters or Enforcers. He could not believe it. He came out into the clearing and went on looking for the enemy, but they were not there. All he could see was the refugees fighting desperately against the flames in an attempt to save the village.

When he went closer he saw Idana carrying a pail of water, with her face smeared with ash. He ran to her.

“Idana!”

She stared at him in amazement. “Ikai! How? When did you get here?”

“I’ll explain later. What’s happened?”

“Lightning hit two of the houses. They caught fire as if they were made of straw, and we couldn’t stop it spreading to the next ones.”

“I see. And my mother?”

“She’s all right, don’t worry. We took the sick and children to the mill by the river. They’re safe there. The others are here trying to put the fire out.”

He stared at the terrible scene, the frantic efforts of the refugees to fight the fire while the flames destroyed their homes. Albana appeared at a run from the river.

“If we don’t control it now, it’ll destroy the whole village,” she said, and pointed to the center, where the flames were massive.

Ikai was watching his people’s uncontrolled, desperate efforts. “We need to get things organized. They’re running around like headless chickens, and

they aren’t going to manage to put it out.”

“But how?” Idana asked. “What do we do?”

Ikai saw the Arkens and called them over. “Go with Albana and pull down the neighboring houses. We need a barrier to stop the fire spreading.”

“How do we do that?” asked the father. “The flames are too strong.”

“Albana will deal with it. Don’t be afraid of what you see her do. It’s for the good of everyone.”

Albana put her hand to her disc of the Shadows round her neck, charged with Power. “I’ll demolish them, don’t you worry,” she said, and took the father and his two sons with her.

“Come on, we have to organize the others,” Ikai said to Idana. He ran to them and made them form a human chain from the river to the heart of the flames, and the water began to reach where it was most needed. Two other groups beat the smaller outbreaks of fire with wet blankets and branches to stop them spreading.

After many hours of struggle they managed to isolate and reduce the main fire, and by dawn they had put it all out.

Idana, exhausted but happy, hastened to prepare balms for burns after helping those who had inhaled smoke.

“What a welcome, brother!” Kyra said with a malicious grin. She sank down beside Ikai where he was sitting on the ground, exhausted.

He smiled at the gibe. “You might all have hurried a bit more, instead of getting here when it’s already over and we don’t need you.”

“Hah! Already over, he says,” Honus protested as he wiped his face. “If it hadn’t been for us all this would have been lost. Not much doubt about that!”

Kyra winked at the giant, who had fought the flames like a whirlwind. He responded with a friendly nod. Karm, Romen and Urda had also done their utmost to stop the catastrophe. The truth was that they had arrived just in time.

“Miratos, get a move on and help Idana,” Kyra ordered the Surgeon. He protested under his breath, but at a glare from Honus he did as he was told.

“Have you seen Mother yet?” Kyra asked.

Ikai shook his head. “No, I couldn’t. I got here in the middle of the fire. I was just going to…”

“You’d better take a break. You look dreadful.”

“I have to go now, before I collapse. I don’t think I could get up once I do.”

“Right then, let’s go.”

Romen offered his hand to Ikai and helped him to his feet.

Brother and sister looked for Idana and Miratos, then went to the watermill. A small crowd had gathered there after the fire, on both sides of the river. Inside the mill they found Solma lying on an improvised bed of grain sacks, with one of the village women tending to her.

“She’s resting quietly, but she’s very weak,” she said as soon as she saw them arrive. “I’ll leave you with her. She’ll be so glad to see you.” She smiled affectionately at the two siblings as she left.

Solma woke at their arrival. Seeing her children, her eyes filled with joyful tears. “Kyra, Ikai, you’re back!”

Kyra kissed her mother’s face tenderly as Ikai bent over and held her in a tight embrace.

“My children, my dear children, with me again,” she said between sobs.

“We’re going to get you better,” Kyra said. “I brought the best Surgeon among the Senoca. And Ikai got hold of the Witch’s potion. We’ll get you better.”

She smiled gratefully. “Whether you manage that or not, no mother could ever feel more proud of her children.”

Kyra glared vindictively at the Surgeon. “Miratos, examine her, and you’d better cure her if you want to see another dawn.”

“There’s no need to threaten me. I’m very much aware of what’s at stake for me here.”

Ikai moved back and let Miratos get on with his work, but kept a close eye on what he did. Idana whispered in his ear: “So you’ve opted to start with the Surgeon rather than trying the Witch’s potion?”

“It’s logical. I thought about it, and I believe it’s the most sensible thing. That’s what we agreed,” He looked towards his sister.

“I agree too, I think it’s the right thing,” Idana said. “You should rest. You’re both exhausted and you’ll collapse any moment now.”

“I want to keep an eye on him.”

“I’ll do that. Trust me. In any case, you don’t have enough knowledge to detect whether what he does is correct or not. I’ll deal with it.”

He hesitated.

“Idana’s right,” Kyra said, her shoulders drooping. “No matter how much we’d like to, we won’t be able to watch everything he does…”

Ikai gave way. “All right then, I’ll leave it in your hands, Idana. At the slightest sign of anything wrong, come and get us.”

“Rest easy.”

Kyra and Ikai did not even make it to the door; they collapsed on to a pile of sacks of grain on the other side of the mill-wheel and fell asleep immediately.

Idana woke them up gently.

“What happened?” Kyra asked as she struggled to wake.

“Is everything all right?” Ikai asked. He could hardly stand. His body felt as though a giant had hit it with a hammer.

“Everything’s fine,” Idana said in her most soothing voice. “You both needed to rest. You were on the verge of collapse. Here’s something to eat. You must be famished.”

“How long have we slept?”

“Its past noon.”

“So late?” Kyra said in disbelief. “It was just a while ago!”

“Well, rather a long while,” Idana said with a smile.

“How is she? Ikai asked.

“Better. I’ll bring you to her now. We moved her to my house. Luckily my scruffy old home was spared by the flames.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Idana put her hands on her hips, trying to keep a stern face. “Eat something first. Apothecary’s orders.”

Kyra burst out laughing. “Idana, who are you trying to fool with that face? You’ve got a heart of gold.”

“Well, authority might not be my thing, but I don’t want you fainting in the middle of the village. Eat, or I’ll be very upset.”

Ikai reached for the food and smiled at the apothecary. “The last thing I want to do is upset you. We’ll eat.”

After doing full justice to the food and the berry juice, they went through the village towards Idana’s house. As they went, they watched the villagers busy with the rebuilding of the houses: men, women and children, all helping according to their own capability. Some were cleaning and carrying away the rubble, while others were already beginning to put up wooden structures to start building the burnt houses again. They were busy everywhere, working without pause, with hope on their faces.

“They’re… they’re truly remarkable,” Ikai said at last. He was filled with wonder at the way they were all working together after the catastrophe.

“They’re so brave,” Kyra said. “They fill me with pride. I’d like to hug them all, one by one.”

“With all they’ve suffered already,” said Idana, “and they’re sacrificing themselves all over again, without a second thought.”

As they passed, everyone stopped to greet them and thank them for their leadership. Ikai tried again, unsuccessfully, to tell them they themselves were the heroes, for their devotion, their courage. Kyra started to hug the closest ones, leaving them breathless. Urda, Honus and Karm came out of one of the houses and joined them.

“Who’s watching Miratos?” Ikai said when he saw them.

“Don’t worry,” Idana said. “Albana’s keeping a close eye on him.”

“Have the watchmen gone back to their posts?”

Idana assured him. “Yes, there’s nothing to report, all quiet.”

“Thank you for taking charge.”

“Oh well, you were all out. It’s my duty, although I’d rather be healing people.”

“Any casualties?”

“Unfortunately there was one: we lost Ilos to the flames. But seeing the scale of the fire, it seems to me we’ve been very lucky. There were a lot of burns, and smoke intoxication, but only that one casualty.”

Ikai nodded. He remembered Ilos well, a tough, good-humored farmer from the Second County.

“It’s a pity. He was a good man.”

Idana turned to look at the others. “Think of all that were saved.”

Ikai nodded, grateful for her encouragement.

In Idana’s house they found Miratos sitting beside the bed where Solma was resting. They were greeted by a voice dripping with sarcasm. “So the sleepyheads decided to wake up at last!” Albana was sitting on a table at the end of the room, sharpening her black daggers.

Kyra laughed, waved at her and hurried to her mother’s side.

“How are you, Mom?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

“I’m fine, my dear. Miratos has worked a miracle. I’m not coughing any longer or spitting blood, and I feel much better.”

Kyra turned to the Surgeon.

“Have you cured her? Have you really cured her?”

Miratos got to his feet slowly, with everyone staring at him. It was a moment before he spoke, and to Ikai it seemed an eternity.

“I’ve treated the illness. It’s a very rare one, seldom seen among our people. The blood of the patient herself is poisoning her body, which is rejecting it. The result is a vicious circle which ends up undermining the health of the sufferer with the passing of time, until finally death occurs.”

“But you’ve cured her?” Kyra insisted.

Miratos raised his hand. He craved his moment of glory, and he was going to enjoy it.

“Luckily, this is an illness I’d already encountered once, a long time ago, when I was younger and had a brilliant future ahead of me. A future which as you know came to pass and carried me to the top of my profession as Surgeon to the Regent.”

“If you don’t tell me whether you’ve cured her or not, I’ll tear your head off, you pompous old man!” said Kyra threateningly.

Miratos shook his head disapprovingly.

“As I was saying… I was confronted with this extremely rare illness. I studied the patient for five years, trying different treatments, deeply intrigued by its strangeness and bent on finding a way to defeat it. I have to admit that I was, and still am, rather obsessed when it comes to defeating illness. I don’t give up, nor did I then, and now I see a new reward.”

“Miratos…” growled Kyra.

The Surgeon ignored her and went on with his explanation. “At first I focused my efforts on extracting and purifying the patient’s blood to transfer it back into the body. But that wasn’t the right approach, since the body simply poisoned the blood anew. After many experiments I finally found a way to treat the condition, to make sure that the body didn’t reject the poisoned blood. Unfortunately it was too late for my patient, who died shortly after I discovered the cure.”

In the face of this ominous commentary, nobody said anything.

“But in Solma’s case, I came in time. I gave her a tonic, and she improved almost immediately.” He indicated several phials on Idana’s working table, with different liquids in them. “So my reply to your question, young lady, is: yes, I have cured her.”

Kyra jumped with joy, almost to the ceiling. Ikai could not believe it. Solma was going to be all right. She was going to get better!

Happiness burst out, and everyone hugged and congratulated each other. Kyra and Ikai embraced Solma, who was smiling happily. Idana on the other hand —Ikai could not help noticing— held back a little. At that moment Albana spoke.

“Tell them about the *but*, you self-opinionated Surgeon.”

Kyra turned to Miratos like a tigress. “But? What *but*?”

Miratos sighed deeply. “The *but* is that the cure is only temporary. For a while Solma will be perfectly well, better than ever before in her life, since her body will resist the poisoning. But eventually her blood will poison it again, and she’ll fall sick again.”

“Why?” Kyra demanded.

“Because her blood will change, and in the process her system will be poisoned all over again.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do to stop it?” Ikai asked.

Miratos bowed his head. “All my attempts at manipulating the blood have been in vain. That’s the root of the illness, and I can’t alter it.”

“What about creating a new tonic?” Kyra asked. “Like you did now?”

“It took me five years to create this one. Creating a new one might take me another five or more, and by then the patient will have…”

“Damn!” Kyra exclaimed.

Ikai was looking at his mother. “How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know… I couldn’t really say. Two years, maybe, or perhaps two seasons. Only her body knows the answer.”

“Damn it!” Kyra cried.

“My child…” said Solma, trying to sooth her.

“There’s still one option left,” said Ikai. He raised his hand to his neck.

“The Witch’s potion?” Albana said. She sounded distrustful.

He nodded.

“We’ve gained time for her,” Idana said quietly. “Do we want to risk it?”

“The Witch swore it would cure her.”

Miratos preened himself like a peacock. “I don’t believe in tales of witches. Science is what can save her.”

“Science or tales of witches – it might be the same thing,” Kyra said. “I saw a lot in the Eternal City. Incredible things, which to you would be witches’ tales but for the Gods were science.”

“The decision is yours, Mother,” Ikai said.

Solma gazed lovingly at her children. “What do you think is best?”

Brother and sister considered their answer carefully.

“The Witch’s potion,” Kyra said.

Ikai agreed with a nod.

“Then I’ll take it.”

Carefully, Ikai uncorked the phial and offered the potion to his mother. Without hesitation, Solma took it from her son’s hand and gulped it down. She smiled at both of them. Suddenly she arched and stiffened. The veins in her arms and legs started to blacken.

“Mom!” Kyra cried in horror.

Ikai held Solma, trying to comfort her, but she was unresponsive.

The veins in her neck too began to turn black. They crept up her face to her forehead as if a plague had infected her. Ikai knew that if she were to die it would be his responsibility, his fault, and he would never forgive himself. Solma began to shake, then collapsed into his arms. Idana came over to them immediately to offer her help.

Solma woke up at dusk. She opened her eyes wide and looked around, without seeing anybody in the room.

“Mother, how are you?” Ikai asked.

“Well… very well… don’t worry, I’m fine. I don’t know what happened, but I feel all right.”

Idana examined her and was surprised to find no trace of the horrible black veins, nor any other physical problem. “She’s better than ever,” she said.

“Did the potion work?” Kyra asked. “Is she better?”

Idana shrugged. “I wouldn’t know how to verify that.”

“But I would,” Miratos said, in his self-satisfied voice.

“Go ahead,” Ikai said, and gave him a warning look.

At Idana’s table Miratos prepared a mixture of liquids and powders in a bowl, then took Solma’s hand. Looking around at everyone so they could see him clearly and would not stop him, he made a cut with a small dagger. Ikai and Kyra tensed, and he made a soothing gesture. Blood began to flow, and he put the bowl under the cut.

Turning to everyone he announced: “Blue: she’s cured. Green: she’s still poisoned.”

All eyes were fixed on the silver liquid in the bowl. The color began to change with the blood. Miratos stirred it with the knife, and they could all see the new color of the liquid.

It was Blue.

Chapter 24

It was midnight, and in an infinite sky, dotted with countless stars, the moon gave a sheen to the waves which bathed the quiet beach. Ikai, sitting on the fine sand, had withdrawn to think about the whirlwind of events of the previous few days. Things had happened so fast he had had no chance to stop and think, and for him that was unheard-of. *I need to put my ideas in order, or else I won't get any peace of mind.*

He watched the water licking his bare feet on the sand and thought how grand and divine was the Goddess Oxatsi, who cared for her children the Senoca. *Thank you, Mother Sea, for saving your daughter Solma. A mother like you, who loves her children and who's given everything for them.* He was filled with joy, his mother was saved and there was no greater satisfaction for him than this. *I didn't think we'd make it. It was a risky bet, but it worked. Sometimes in life there's no choice but to risk everything for those we love. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, but unless you put everything you have into it, with all your heart, there's no way to salvation.*

The hushing of the sea and the sound of the waves breaking on the beach made up a melody which charmed his ears. Sitting there, in that little paradise, evil seemed distant, almost non-existent… *But evil's out there; the Gods, the Enforcers, Sesmok and his Guard and Hunters are all there. And they're all looking for us, to kill us. I have to prevent that. I have to look after my own people, look after this wonderful place, this shelter for our people. I know it's not my responsibility, that it's a load I never asked to carry, but I've taken it on. I have to use every means possible to care for this little corner of peace and keep it safe from the evil of the Gods.*

This worried him deeply. The betrayal by Isaz, a friend whom he had trusted, had affected him and made him feel he had come to a crossroads. *No matter how much I love this refuge, the truth is it might very well be compromised., In his treachery Isaz might have betrayed us to Sesmok or the Enforcers…* Doubts about what he should do tormented him: stay and

rebuild, or gather everything together and go somewhere else, leaving behind all their hard work, all the hopes they had set on that shelter? *I have to make a decision, and it's a hard one. I can't afford to be wrong in this.* He looked up at the moon and wondered…

A voice spoke behind him. "Difficult decisions, leader of the shelter?"

He recognized both voice and seductive tone at once. His heart turned a somersault.

"Lurking secretly in the dark, Shadow?" he replied without turning his head.

Albana let herself fall on to the sand beside him, with the lightness and stealth of a feather swaying in the warm sea breeze which enwrapped them.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked as her eyes gazed out at the immensity of Mother Sea.

He inhaled the salty breath of the ocean. After letting it out slowly he said: "I'm wondering whether to call a meeting tomorrow, to decide whether we stay and rebuild or leave in search of some new home that's safer than this one."

Albana nodded slowly. "I guessed that if you were here it was to think over difficult decisions. I see I was right. Would you rather I left you alone?"

Ikai put his hand on her arm. "No, please, stay," he said urgently. He did not want her to leave; he wanted her to stay with him, for company and help.

She gazed at him and nodded, understanding what he needed. As their eyes met, Ikai felt anew the desire and passion he had felt the night before when they had kissed on arrival at the Shelter. He felt his heart racing, beating with the strength of war drums, and feared she would notice, even though he was sure the enigmatic brunette could read him like an open book.

"I think they've already made the decision for you. They're rebuilding. I must admit they have an unshakeable spirit. For all the pain and suffering they've been through, nothing stops them. They're still clinging to the hope of being able to live in freedom."

Ikai looked away from her black, almond-shaped eyes, where his soul seemed to lose itself, and gazed musingly out to sea.

“That makes my decision more difficult still.”

“And that is?”

“To call the council and tell them we must leave. The Shelter isn’t safe any longer, not after Isaz’s betrayal. I can’t guarantee their safety if we stay. We have to find another home. I know it won’t be very popular, but it’s what my gut feeling and my head tell me.”

Albana’s gaze turned to the moon. “I read Isaz’s eyes when I interrogated him. He passed on information about us, but not about the Shelter. I’m sure of that. In the Eternal City, as a Shadow, I was trained to betray, to spy, to kill… but also to detect lying and deceit. Isaz wasn’t lying, he didn’t tell them about The Shelter. I can assure you of that.”

“He didn’t? Why?”

“Corrupt men act for different reasons, all of them powerful: greed, hate, fear… but they’re still men. Hope still lives in them. Perhaps Isaz had some hope of escaping… hiding from the evil he served, taking shelter here and escaping… like all of them.” She waved in the direction of the forest and the village behind her.

“Maybe… but the risk’s too great.” He looked into her enigmatic, penetrating eyes. “I’m not denying you may be right. I don’t understand your dark arts, and I don’t try to. If you say you read it in his eyes, I believe you, I trust you completely. But I don’t want my people to die because of an unnecessary risk I decided to run, because of a mistake of my own. I have to do what’s right, what’s most sensible. I’ll put the idea forward to the council tomorrow and let them all decide.”

Albana smiled. This time it was not one of her bitter, sarcastic smiles but a sweet one, and her sharp gaze softened.

“You’re sensible,” she said, “you really are. And intelligent too.”

Ikai looked at her, taken aback. The cat-like brunette rarely paid compliments.

“Don’t be so surprised. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t have stayed with you. Or do you really think I’d put my life in the hands of a brainless leader? Not for all the Power of the Gods!” She twisted her mouth in amusement.

Ikai could not help a small laugh.

“Stop carrying the world’s burdens on your shoulders for one night and relax. Tomorrow’s another day, and you can’t do anything more for now.” She nudged him playfully with her shoulder.

At the sight of her cat-like, enigmatic features, now softened by a warm smile, he felt an irrepressible desire to take her in his arms and kiss her. Albana, seeming to read his feelings in his eyes, bent her head towards him, and he kissed her with all the fire and exultation of an erupting volcano, letting himself be carried away by his passion. Albana responded, and both fused in a tight embrace, in a kiss which welded together two young hearts in search of eternal love.

When they moved their lips apart and broke the kiss which joined their burning souls, Ikai remained lost in her. He did not want the link, the powerful feelings which were running through him, to stop. She got to her feet and undressed very slowly, letting her clothes fall to one side. She smiled at him with irresistible roguishness, and stepped into the sea with her sensuous, swaying walk. She stopped when the water reached her waist. Ikai watched her in fascination. Her body, her sensuality, the manifest femininity revealed by the moon, left him spellbound.

“Come with me,” she said, turning towards him with her hand outstretched. Her eyes shone and her jet-black hair danced wildly in the sea breeze.

Ikai too stood up, undressed and took her hand. As he did so he felt the water caressing his body. Shyness gave way to exuberance, then abandon, and finally to ecstasy. The two young lovers united body and soul in a joy as immense as the sea which enveloped them.

A distant, troubling sound woke Ikai. He opened his eyes as he emerged from an intoxicating dream, not understanding what the buzz in his ears could be. He was lying on the beach, fragments of the wonderful night he had just enjoyed with Albana dancing in his mind. The first rays of light struck his eyes like two shining arrows launched by a vengeful star, and he had to cover them with his arm. He felt around, but she was no longer with him. *How typical of her,* he thought with a smile.

The annoying sound echoed again, and now that he was awake he recognized it. His heart almost leapt out of his mouth. *It's an alarm horn!*

He jumped to his feet and dressed as quickly as he could. Suddenly he saw smoke to the east, at the far end of the bay. It was the harbor. The fishing boats were burning.

And then he saw them. Three huge triremes were coming into the harbor.

"Oh, no, by Oxatsi! Enforcers!"

He ran with all his might towards the village. He crossed the beach and the forest which separated him from the houses like a runaway horse, leaping over vegetation, fallen trees and rocks. Blood was drumming in his ears and his lungs were burning by the time he reached the village. In the square the villagers were beginning to gather together. They looked around in confusion, not knowing what was going on or what to do. Fear was beginning to show on their faces. He found Kyra in front of the Council House with Urda and hastened to them.

"What's going on?" Kyra asked in alarm.

"Triremes… in the harbor… they've found us," he managed to articulate breathlessly.

Kyra's face was suddenly grim. "Sesmok? The Guard?"

Urda shook her head. "Worse. Enforcers. The Guard doesn't have triremes."

Kyra clenched her fists. "That means Eyes-of-the-Gods… Executors… How can they have found us out?"

Ikai shook his head. He had no idea.

"Isaz," Urda said. "Unless we have another traitor."

The horn went on sounding the alarm, and the refugees gathering around them were getting more and more nervous and excited.

Karm, Honus and Romen appeared from one of the houses.

"What shall we do?" Urda said. "They'll soon be here."

"We'll fight!" Kyra cried furiously. "We'll stand up to them! Let them know what the Senoca are made of!"

Ikai looked at his sister, then at the expectant crowd around them. Most were peasants, and very few of them knew how to wield a weapon. They were all there now, around five hundred of them crowding the square. No, if they confronted the Executors, they would be killed. He could not let them be massacred. He saw the pleading eyes of the men and women in front fixed on him; he heard the whispers and murmurs of the poor wretches. He knew that if he asked them to fight they would, but he could not. It would mean a death sentence at the hands of the Enforcers.

“Where are our warriors?” he asked.

“Here!” said one of those he had trained.

“Bring me the weapons.”

The man nodded and left at a run. The thirty warriors came closer to Ikai.

Kyra looked around. “That’s it then, we’ll fight!” she cried.

But the faces of the people showed fear, and in their eyes she read that they wanted to run, not face the brutal Enforcers of the Gods. There were children there…

Idana’s voice reached her as she made her way through the throng. “We can’t fight against them. They’re Enforcers. They’ll kill us. We’ll have to get away from here before they arrive. There’s still time if we hurry.”

Kyra shook her head.

“Think of the women, the children and the sick,” Idana insisted. “We have to get away. Please.”

Seeing the terror in the faces around her, Kyra folded her arms. “I’d fight,” she said. “But it’s Ikai’s decision. He’s the leader.”

Her brother breathed deeply and considered. He had to make a decision, and fast. The Enforcers would be landing on the beach by now. *Two opposite choices, fight or flee, and I must decide, I’m responsible for what happens to these people.* The refugees were waiting, their pleading eyes begging for a way out, for someone to lead them. *My decision, my responsibility…* he repeated to himself, and then he made his choice.

“Listen to me, everyone!” He raised his arms and the crowd fell silent. “The Enforcers are coming for us. They’re landing on the beach and they’ll soon be here. There’s no time to lose. You must flee to the sunken pass and

then go to the eastern woods. Don’t turn back. The Enforcers will destroy the Shelter and kill anyone they capture. Leave everything. There’s no time!” he shouted as loudly as his lungs would let him. “Leave the island!”

There was a moment of silence, followed immediately by a tumult of gabbling, excited, fearful voices.

“Idana, take all the sick with you. Urda, help her and take care of Solma.

Warriors and guards, come with me. We’ll face up to the Enforcers, distract them while everybody else escapes. We’ll try to gain enough time for you to get away.”

“I’ll fight beside you,” Kyra said. Her eyes were sparkling.

“No, sis, I need you to guide them. Without someone leading them, they’ll never manage. They’re defenseless, terrified, they’ll fall off the cliffs or trample each other in a stampede. They won’t make it. Lead the way for them and get them off the island. Get them to the forest and hide there.”

Kyra shook her head stubbornly. “I’m not leaving you.”

“You must.”

“You go. You’re the leader. I’ll stay and fight.”

“I’m the leader, and that’s why I have to stay. Don’t argue with me, there’s no time for that. Save them, save Mother.”

At the mention of Solma, Kyra hesitated.

“Go with them and get them to safety. Please!”

At last she relented. There were tears of rage in her eyes.

“All right, damn it! But don’t let them kill you!”

“Don’t worry, sis, I won’t give them that satisfaction.”

“Romen, help me,” Kyra said, and the young man followed her.

“The rest of you, go! Go at once! Now! Follow Kyra!” Ikai cried at the top of his voice.

At this urgent command, the refugees obeyed him. They ran to the pass, crossing the village and the adjoining fields, leaving everything behind: their homes, their belongings and their hopes. They were fleeing for their lives in terror once again. It appeared to be the mark of the Senoca.

Ikai watched them leave, trying to find a way of gaining time. Nothing occurred to him. Karm and Honus came to his side.

“We need weapons,” said Karm.

“You can leave. If you stay you’ll be facing the Enforcers, facing death.”

Karm met his gaze. “You believed in me and gave me justice. It’s time to return the favor. I never thought I’d ever get justice for my sister, and for that I’ll be forever grateful. I have nothing else to live for except this.” He waved at the buildings and the men behind him. “This is my fight now. For years I suffered in the mines, as thousands do every day. I managed to escape, and it’s my duty to fight against the ones who enslave us. If I must die, so be it, but I’ll die as a free man, fighting against the Gods. And if I survive, I’ll go on fighting until every one of our people is free.”

“Thank you, Karm,” Ikai said. He offered him his hand, and Karm grasped his forearm.

“Damn my rotten luck!” Honus said. “If he stays, so do I. In any case, I wouldn’t know what to do without him. We’ve been together too many years, day after day and night after night. But I’d like the world to know it’s not because I have any time for sentiment or lost causes, like this bleeding-heart here. I still have some wits left and there are no cobwebs inside my head. I’ll fight for my friend, and to take revenge on those bastards who kept me for years in those mines like a bloody rat. Those bastards are going to pay!”

“Thank you, Honus,” Ikai said, a little put off by the giant’s speech. Then he turned to the fifty braves who would fight with him and thanked them as well.

“The honor of fighting alongside a Hero of the Senoca is ours,” one of them said.

Ikai sensed the men’s courage and devotion. “The honor is all mine,” At the same time he saw the fear lurking in their eyes. They had never shed blood, never confronted an Enforcer. “Now listen to me carefully. I’ve killed men, and I’ve killed Enforcers too, and I can assure you that even though it’s harder to kill them, Enforcers bleed and die just like men. Lean on your companions, fight together. Today these Senoca will shed the blood of the Enforcers.”

“We’ll fight,” a voice cried. “They’ll bleed and die!”

“For the Senoca!” cried another.

The cry was picked up by all: “For the Senoca!”

Ikai’s spirits rose.

The Arkens appeared, bringing the weapons with them. Colmes, the patriarch was first, his arms loaded with spears. His sons Telmas and Voltes carried bows and quivers of arrows. There was no fear in their eyes, only determination. Ikai felt admiration for that family. Only a few months ago they had been his neighbors, poor slave farm-workers. Now they were ready to fight the Enforcers and die if necessary. The Shelter had given them, as it had to all around them, the hope they had never had before.

Over his shoulder he slung the quiver of arrows Voltes had handed him. Out there in the open the Enforcers would cut them to pieces. *Think! We have to gain time but how?*

And then the idea came to him.

“Follow me!” he cried, and ran towards the Council House. “We’ll lock ourselves up in the houses in the square. Bolt the doors and windows so they can’t come in! Quickly!”

Kyra was guiding the refugees to the pass. The tide was coming in. “Damn!” she muttered. This would make things much more difficult. She climbed on to a boulder and watched the column moving through the thick vegetation.

“Hurry up! Don’t lag behind!” she urged them. She was aware of the danger behind them.

The refugees advanced along the abrupt terrain as fast as they could in a long line. Luckily panic had not spread and they were able to help each other as they went. But they were scared, and hysteria could easily break out at any moment. Urda was carrying Solma piggy-back as though she was a little girl. Idana was helping a sick man, almost sweeping him off his feet in the process. Kyra gave thanks to Oxatsi for her friends.

“Follow the path!”

Romen appeared carrying a little girl in either arm. “Their mother is sick and she can’t manage,” he said with his charming smile.

“Stop playing the hero. You won’t be able to cross with them in your arms either.”

He winked and went on. “Well, that remains to be seen.”

“Come on, get a move on!” Kyra urged them on as her eyes scanned the end of the column. The fear of seeing the Enforcers appear was eating away at her stomach.

The first group of Enforcers emerged from the dense vegetation of the forest, leaving the beach behind, and headed to the village. There were two groups: on one side one Eye-of-the-Gods and twelve Executors, and a second Eye leading a dozen more on the other. They moved in formation, without fearing anything or anyone, sure of their lethal strength. They were impressive: the gaunt Eyes, with their long-hemmed robes and the helmets of horror; the Executors in their red robes and cloaks, silver armor shining in the sun, their long silver spears a promise of death.

When they marched into the village an absolute silence received them. The place was deserted. There was not a soul in sight, and no sound to be heard save that of the birds in the distance. The breeze whispered through the village, and its murmur as it brushed the walls was all the Enforcers could hear. They moved forward into the square and stopped in front of the Council House. The two Eyes scanned the area with their helmets of horror.

Ikai appeared on the roof.

“Are you looking for the Heroes of the Senoca?”

The Eyes-of-the-Gods raised their helmets in his direction.

“Well then, you’ve found me! Loose arrows! All of you!”

Before the Eyes could give any order to their Executors, there came a lethal whistle and fifty arrows cut through the air to strike the bodies of the two Enforcers. There was a tense silence as the warriors watched breathlessly from the roofs of the adjacent houses. Like felled trees, both Eyes fell forward.

Ikai turned to his people. “You see? They bleed and die just like us! They’re not immortal, neither them nor their Gods! They might be stronger

than us, their blood darker than ours, but we can kill them! Don’t be afraid, fight! Fight with courage, we’re the Senoc—” A spear flew straight at his head, and with a brusque movement he managed to avoid it by a finger’s-breadth. He searched among the Executors for the one who had tried to kill him, then pointed him out.

“Kill him! All release against him!”

Another fifty arrows rained on the Executor. For a single moment he did not move. Then he pulled two arrows from his body, without flinching. Watching him, the warriors feared the worst. A moment passed. And he fell to the ground. The warriors cheered. Several spears flew against them, thrown so hard they were impaled. Suddenly without leadership, the Executors began to attack, each on his own. Some tried to force their way into the houses, others hurled their spears against the warriors on the roofs. Ikai saw the enemy’s confusion and knew it was his only chance.

“All together! That group there!” he cried, pointing at the Executors who were trying to pull down the door of the Council House. A few moments later only two of them were left standing, wounded but still on their feet.

He was well aware that a single Executor could easily kill six of his men. “Don’t let them break in! If they do, don’t fight them, flee!”

The Executors split up, trying to break down the doors of the adjacent buildings. With two of them they succeeded and went up to the roofs, but following Ikai’s orders the warriors jumped to the next building.

“Release! Release! Don’t let them get to you!” Beside Ikai, Karm and Honus let fly arrow after arrow.

“To bring down one of these bastards you need a dozen arrows!” howled Honus.

“Release faster, then! For each one of yours I launch three!” Karm retorted.

“Riddle them with arrows!” Honus cried.

The last of the Executors was brought down on one of the roofs. With his chest and legs full of arrows, he toppled to the street.

There was a terrified silence. Nobody spoke. They were all staring at the lifeless bodies of the Enforcers, unable to believe what they had just achieved.

“Go down there, finish them off and retrieve the arrows. We’ll need them.”

Honus gave a huge smile of satisfaction. “I’ll finish off those bastards,” he said, and ran down with a dozen warriors following him.

Karm stared out towards the beach. “Will more of them come?” he asked Ikai.

“They will, and we won’t be able to surprise them again.”

Kyra reached the end of the path that led to the pass, where the two watchmen were waiting for them.

“Have you seen any Enforcers?”

“We haven’t seen anybody,” the youngest one said.

“Are you sure? They landed on the big beach.”

“Sure, Kyra,” the older one said. “Everything’s quiet and clear. We haven’t seen a soul.”

Kyra looked at the pass, which was barely visible under the water. But it was there: a stretch of firm rock which would take them to the beach on the other side.

She pointed to the coast. “And there?”

“Nothing. All’s quiet.”

“Very well then. You go first and make sure there’s no danger. Signal to me from the edge of the forest behind the beach.”

The two watchmen nodded and went down to the pass.

“Right then, on we go!” Kyra shouted, and waved at the line of refugees. They went on at once, leaving hope and sanctuary behind. Their steps were heavy with the weight of despair. The fire in their souls was dying out. They were no longer free, no longer able to live in peace. Their dream was dying, and with it a great part of their souls.

They climbed down the boulders, careful not to tumble, until they reached the water which covered the pass. Kyra signaled to the two

watchmen who had already crossed and were waiting on the other side. In reply they signaled to her to continue. There was no danger.

We might make it after all, maybe we'll be safe, she thought hopefully. But she was not entirely convinced.

She gazed at the long line. "Children, sick and women first," she said.

And they started to cross over the pass. The water came to the waists of the adults. Romen crossed with the two girls in his arms, making sure the water did not reach their chins. Urda followed him with Solma. Kyra smiled at her lovingly. Her mother smiled back.

"Don't worry, everything will be all right," she said.

But Kyra was uneasy, as she always was. Idana came near her and nearly fell headlong as she tried to help the sick man.

"Give her a hand, quick!" Kyra said to two men who were waiting their turn.

"Thank you," Idana smiled.

"Keep going!" Kyra urged. If the tide went on rising things would get complicated. Many of them did not even know how to swim.

Ikai was not mistaken. Two new sets of Enforcers appeared. They managed to repel the first with a concentrated rain of arrows, but the second attacked one of the houses and managed to get in by breaking down the bolted door. They climbed up to the roof, and there they slaughtered the Senoca warriors who stood no chance in close combat against the brutal Executors.

"Loose against them! Ikai shouted to his warriors. "Don't let them get across the roofs!"

The colossal Executors took two more roofs. The warriors stood up to them bravely, but with tremendous blows the Executors threw them off like paper dolls, or ran them through with their spears as if they were made of straw. They reached the next roof. The Arkens were defending it, along with half a dozen more men. They let fly against the Executors, but failed to bring down the last two. Colem stepped in front of his two sons and faced

the Executor advancing towards them. The monster shed black blood from multiple wounds, but did not fall. Colem loosed at close range and the arrow sank deep into the Executor's chest, piercing his armor. But even that did not stop him. With a dull blow, he ran Colem through with his spear.

"Colem, no!" Ikai cried, powerless to help.

Telmas and Volte threw themselves at the Executor with shouts of rage and buried their knives in him again and again. The Executor tried to finish them off, but at last his strength failed him and he fell to the ground. Telmas and Volte stabbed him desperately. Colem died in his sons' arms.

A great man, an exemplary father, a free Senoca, Ikai thought. *May Father Girlai be with you in your new voyage.* "Keep shooting! Don't let them take the roofs or we'll be lost!"

Karm gestured towards the east with an arrow. "Two more teams," he said.

Honus pointed to the west. "And two more over there, but they're not coming near, the swine."

Ikai saw that the Eyes-of-the-Gods were talking among themselves, but did not attack.

"Come and get me, you swine!" Honus shouted at them, "Come on if you have the guts!"

But instead of moving, the Enforcers kept out of reach of the arrows.

Honus was still taunting them. "Look at those cowardly rats! Look at them trembling with fear" They don't even dare come any closer!" He turned to the Senoca warriors. "There they are, the terrible Executors, the slaughterers of men, scared to death!"

Karm took over from his friend. "Today is a great day! A day that will go down in the annals of our history! Today's the day when a bunch of slaves fought the Enforcers and won! This is the day when these Senoca will make history! And I'll die proudly today, so that my death can be an example for those who come after us!"

Karm's words filled Ikai with strength. It was more than likely that they would all die, but it would not be in vain. Their sacrifice would inspire others. The Senoca would know what had happened there and never forget it.

Suddenly the smell of burning wafted to his nostrils, and he turned to face the wind.

“Fire! On both sides of the square!”

The Eyes had given the order to burn the houses. That was how they were going to force them down from the roofs. *Hell!* His gaze followed the two teams as they set fire to the outer houses. *They’re closing us in. They’re going to burn the whole village, from the outside in, to cut off our escape. They’re going to roast us alive.* The Senoca warriors became aware of what was going on. Nervousness spread through them.

“They’re going to burn us to a crisp!” Honus roared.

“We have to get out of here!” Karm said. He pointed towards the beach. “Now, before there’s no escape route left.”

The raging fire spread everywhere. Hungrily, the flames devoured the fragile buildings of wood and straw. The smoke thickened, the heat was suffocating and they could barely breathe. The Enforcers went on with their work.

Ikai watched his home, his refuge, his dream, going up in flames. *Well… here ends the dream, my hope. All I wanted was to live in peace in this wonderful place, out of reach of the Gods. Now it’s all burning… it seems we’ll never live free… not as long as the Enforcers of the Gods come after us. It was such a beautiful dream…* But the square was not burning yet, and they had one last possibility of escape. He made his decision.

“Everyone to the square! Fast!”

Ahead of him a narrow alley of flames opened out between several blazing houses. He did not need to think twice.

“Follow me! To the beach!”

He ran with the flames licking his body. All was heat, smoke, suffocation. He was burning. He ran faster and at last reached the forest. He turned and saw that the warriors were following him. In the flames, burning even more fiercely now, came Honus and Karm, with twenty or so warriors, including Volte and Telmas, running after them. The last few warriors failed to make it when a house collapsed on them.

They hurried to the beach by the forest path. Behind them the village blazed. The Enforcers had seen them escape and were coming after them, running with a heavy, warlike tread. The beach and the sea opened up

before them like salvation. But it was no more than an illusion. There was no salvation from the Enforcers.

“Now what?” Karm asked him as he reached his side.

“They’re… at our heels,” panted Honus.

The rest of the warriors arrived at a run. To the east, bordering the rocks, Ikai new the pass was there, Kyra and the others must have been crossing at that moment. To the west was the tiny fishing village. Anchored by the pier like nightmarish sea beasts were the three great triremes.

“We have to drive them as far away as possible from the sunken pass. Run to the harbor!”

Although he knew there was no possible escape, he was going to try every way he could to gain time for the others to reach safety. As he ran, he glanced back and saw the two groups of Executors following them. Luckily they were much slower, but they also had more stamina. Sooner or later they would catch them.

At the end of the beach they stopped, undecided. Ahead was the tiny harbor. Fifteen or so Executors were guarding the ships, led by an Eye-of-the-Gods. Ikai glanced at the forest; the best option was to go back into it and make them follow. He was about to give the order when two more teams appeared at the edge of the trees in a line.

“They’re cutting us off!” said Karm.

Honus was looking back at their pursuers. “So what the hell do we do now?”

Ikai weighed up the situation. They were trapped. They might try to break the enemy line and escape into the forest. It was the logical thing to do, even though many of them would not get through. *Or we might try something crazy… like Kyra would.* He considered it again and decided. *We’ll do it Kyra’s way!*

“Follow me!” he shouted, and ran to the harbor. The guardian Executors saw them approach and formed a double barrier of brutal bodies across the entire width of the wooden pier. Their way was blocked.

When they stepped on the first planks Ikai raised his arm and shouted: “Stop!”

Stumbling, his men obeyed. Facing them, ten paces ahead, was the barrier of Executors. Behind them, approaching from the forest, were the remainder.

The Eye pointed at him with his silver book. “Turn yourself in, Hero, and your men will be spared.”

“Don’t listen to him, Ikai,” Karm said. “They’ll kill us anyway.”

“You have no way of escape, you are surrounded,” the Eye said, still more shrilly. “Turn yourself in and you will not die.”

“In your dreams, you filthy pig!” growled Honus.

Ikai considered the possibility of surrendering. *I might be able to save them. They don’t deserve to die like this, at the hands of these ruthless beasts.* A shadow emerged from the water and crawled stealthily along the pier behind the Enforcers. He realized at once it was not a shadow at all. *We’ve still got a chance. I’ll have to take the risk and grab it.*

“Split up! Half of you hold the rearguard, the other half charge against the barrier!”

“Stupid slave!” the Eye said. “You will pay for this!”

The shadow took shape behind the Eye at the exact moment the warriors charged against the Executors. Albana materialized out of the shadow, and her two black daggers slit the Eye’s throat. The Enforcer died without even realizing what had hit him. The charge of the warriors was repelled with brutal strength by the Executors, whose spears ran the first Senoca through, giving them a clean death. Devastating blows hurled the second wave of warriors down into the sea and on to the beach.

Ikai, Karm, Telmas and his brother Volte were releasing their arrows against the Executors at the ends of the line, but the monsters, even when struck by many, fought on.

“We have to clear a way through!” Ikai cried. But the pier was too narrow to permit a united charge.

“I’ll do it,” Honus said. “Leave it to me!”

He hurled himself against the two Executors in the middle of the line like a raging bull, crashing against them with all the weight and momentum of his huge body, toppling one to the ground and forcing the other to give way. Albana, behind the fallen warriors, started to deal death, stabbing

mercilessly at inhuman speed. A spear sought to pierce Honus, but he deflected it to one side. Seizing it with both hands, he gave a mighty heave and wrenched it out of the Executor's hands, then speared him with a brutal blow.

More warriors joined in the fray. Ikai, Karm, Telmas and Volte loosed their arrows and advanced, trying to avoid their own men in the process. The warriors struggled and fell amid screams, while the Executors came down with no more than a few cavernous grunts. A spear flew towards Ikai's chest, but Karm shoved him and saved him from being skewered. One of the Executors broke free and hurled himself at Telmas. Both of them fell to the ground. Immediately Volte and Karm stabbed the Executor in an attempt to save Telmas. Ikai got to his feet and went to support them. Under their blows the monster's black blood formed a pool, and at last the monster died. They shoved it aside in order to free Telmas. But it was too late; the Executor had broken his neck. Volte bent over his older brother's body, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I'm … so sorry," Ikai said.

Volte wiped away his tears with his bloody sleeve and said: "I've lost my father and my brother. And I don't care if I have to die myself too. Let's fight, Ikai, let's fight until these filthy beasts and their ruthless Gods are no more than a painful memory."

"We'll fight!" Ikai answered, and offered his hand to help him get up.

Volte stared at the Executors, filled with hate. "Death, for the Senoca!" – and he ran back into the fray with Ikai and Karm following him. The line of Executors fell soon afterwards in the face of the bravery and despair of the last Senoca. Ikai turned to give the order to retreat to the rearguard, but he realized to his horror that it was already too late. The Executors had reached them and were decimating them. None of them would survive.

"Run!" Albana cried, and gestured with her bloody daggers.

Ikai watched his men being annihilated behind them. An infinite rage and pain filled his heart.

"Come on, Ikai!" Albana urged him.

He cursed and ran down the pier, jumping over the bodies of the Executors and of his own men. Albana ran ahead of him, followed by half a dozen surviving warriors. Among them was Honus, with a tremendous cut

in his forehead which was bleeding profusely. They reached the first trireme and saw the Executors already coming down the pier after them. Ikai saw Albana ignore the trireme and keep running. As he approached it, he realized that its stern was blazing. When they passed the second trireme it was also burning. Ikai began to understand her game. They reached the third trireme, which was not burning.

“On board! Quick!” she shouted.

On the ship they found two Executors lying dead on the deck. Honus and Karm went to the oars at once, and two warriors followed them.

Albana pointed to where the enormous ropes held the ship moored at the pier. “Cast off!” she cried.

Ikai freed the ropes on one side, while Volte and another warrior did the same on the other side.

“Get a move on! They’re nearly here!”

An Executor raced up to Volte and his companion just as they freed the ropes.

“Watch out!” shouted Ikai.

The Executor hurled the spear with such force that it went through the warrior beside Volte. The young man grabbed the spear with both hands and fell dead with a moan. But Volte did not cower. Eyes glaring, he attacked the Executor. Ikai, fearing he would be killed, drew sword and knife and attacked. The Executor was a head taller than the farmer and twice his size. Volte’s knife sank deep in the Executor’s groin, seeking the vital points, as all the warriors of the Shelter had been taught. But the Executor, without flinching, hit Volte’s shoulder with his massive forearm. There was a crack, and Volte fell to the ground as if he had been split in two by a hammer.

“Noooooooo!” Ikai cried when he saw the youngest of the Arkens fall. He launched a furious blow which pierced the Executor’s thigh. A knife shaped like a half-moon searched out his neck. He bent to one side, and the silver edge brushed his head. He rolled on the ground and crouched on one knee. Watching the monsters fight, he had noticed they had difficulties against small mobile targets. The Executor struck from above, bending awkwardly with an unbalanced move. Ikai rolled nimbly to one side and stabbed twice at the other leg.

Blackish blood fell down both greaves. “Stand up and fight, slave,” came a cavernous voice. Ikai, still crouching, positioned himself behind the Executor, who started to turn ponderously. Ikai stabbed at his legs again. His enemy tried to reach him with two powerful horizontal slashes, but his nimbleness and speed allowed him to avoid them. The monster’s legs failed him and he toppled over. Ikai went to finish him off.

He heard Albana call: “Ikai, behind you!”

Several Executors were about to reach him. He moved away from the wounded monster and lifted Volte on to his shoulder.

“Leave him! You won’t make it carrying him!”

But he was not prepared to leave Volte there. He would save him; he would not let him die like his father and brother. He made his way to the ship as fast as he could. The whistle of Albana’s arrows told him how close they were. He reached the gangplank. *One last effort.* He was very tired, and when he set foot on the gangplank he lost his balance and almost fell into the water.

“Come on!” Albana cried desperately.

He took a deep breath, adjusted his precious cargo on his shoulder and staggered across the gangplank, then stumbled headlong on to the deck. Two Executors came up the plank, but Albana blocked their way from the deck.

“Don’t even dream about it, you’re not coming on board!” she said. She murmured several words, and from her hand there issued a dark mist which moved towards the Executors. They hesitated in surprise. The mist circled them and turned solid, like an arcane rope. With a twist of her arm she made them fall in the water.

“Row for your lives!” she cried.

The ship began to move, leaving behind the port where the rest of the Executors were now arriving. The other two triremes, useless now, continued to burn.

Ikai staggered to his feet and made sure Volte was still breathing. He did not know whether he would recover, but at least he was alive. He went to Albana at the guardrail and watched the fire which was destroying the Shelter. A great column of smoke rose to the sky from the interior of the island.

“Do you think they’ll have made it?” he asked her.

Albana looked back at him. “Let’s hope so.”

At that moment Kyra was swimming across the pass. The others had all crossed, and she and the last few men were swimming towards the beach where they were waiting. She looked back, fearing she would see the Executors, but there was no-one.

She spat salty water. “Thank you, brother,” she murmured.

When they reached the beach she moved on among the refugees, who were waiting to continue their flight, soaked and terrified. The beach looked like a shipwreck, with the refugees as the castaways of a sunken dream which would never now be made real. At the edge of the forest she stopped to decide which way to go. To the east along the coast, or through the woods to the west? The woods would be safer, though it would be hard going for those poor souls.

She turned to tell the expectant refugees, but at the same moment she remembered something. She looked toward the edge of the forest, searching for the two watchmen. They were not there. She looked all along the beach, but did not find them.

“No…” she muttered under her breath, and turned to the forest again.

From among the trees thirty Eyes-of-the-Gods appeared, spread out along the entire beach. They advanced with their right hands extended. In the middle, standing out, was a figure in black which froze her blood.

“Oskas… the Master spy…”

Before she could react, the Eyes opened their hands. Held on their palms were Discs of the Gods. Kyra reached for the dagger at her waist.

A dreadful roar, like the thunder of a great storm, filled the beach. It came from the discs. Just as in a storm, lightning followed. From the discs came bolts of light that aimed for the bodies of the Senoca. Kyra stared in horror as the flashes reached her people, leaping from one to the next. She saw Idana fall amid spasms. Romen covered the two little girls with his

body, but the three were hit and fell. Urda resisted amid convulsions, but ended up falling too. Solma crumpled to the ground beside Urda.

“Mom!” cried Kyra an instant before she was hit.

And darkness overcame her.

Chapter 25

“Kyra!”

“Ugh…”

“Kyra, wake up!”

“Ugh, my head…”

Kyra opened her eyes slowly. Her head and body hurt as if a herd of wild horses had stampeded over her. She put her hands to her temples, hoping the pain would subside, but it did not. She was lying on the ground, and through a row of bars she could see a circular silver ceiling. She stretched out her head and saw that the floor of the room was silver too. *One of the Enforcers’ prisons.* Her stomach shrank, as if icy water had been poured on her navel. She half-rose, holding on to the bars, and looked around. Forming a perfect circle, she saw a dozen black spheres with bars at the front. Each sphere held a prisoner.

It’s impossible! I’m in the Dungeons of Oblivion!

“You’re awake at last,” Urda said from another of the spherical cages.

“What happened? What are we doing shut up in here?”

“They captured us, don’t you remember?” Idana said from another sphere.

“Yes… I remember… but how did we get here?”

“They brought us in a huge trireme, full of Eyes-of-the-Gods and Enforcers,” Urda said scornfully.

Kyra ran her gaze along the other spheres, trying to identify the prisoners inside. They were all from the Shelter. A handsome face smiled at her. “Welcome to the waking world,” Romen said with his characteristic smile as their eyes met. “You took your time.”

“Romen, why don’t I remember anything?”

“Unfortunately he paid special attention to you.”

“Who?”

Urda spat to one side. “The monster in black with the helmet that steals souls.”

Kyra remembered the sinister figure in the ambush at the beach. “Oskas! The Master Spy!” A shiver ran down her back, and she had to shake it off.

“He did something to you… to keep you unconscious the whole journey,” said Idana.

“Why?”

“He’s not exactly one for explanations,” Romen said. He sounded low-spirited. “I begged him to wake you up. We were afraid for your life, and by the grace of Oxatsi he didn’t strangle me.” He showed her his neck, where there was a nasty bruise.

With a start, Kyra noticed that Solma was not there with them. “And my mother? Where’s my mom?” Asking the question made her feel so sick she thought she was going to throw up.

Romen bowed his head. “He took her…”

“Where? Why?” Kyra shook the bars fiercely, trying to get out to help her mother.

“We don’t know,” Idana said. “We’ve been here for days. Calm down, for goodness’ sake, or you’ll hurt yourself. Escape’s impossible. You must calm down…”

“How can I calm down when they’ve taken my mother? I have to get out of here! I have to help her!”

“Idana’s right,” Romen said, looking defeated. “We’ve already tried forcing this sphere-cage. We’ve been trying for days, but there’s no way …”

Kyra looked to Urda for support.

“I’ve already tried, but I couldn’t,” her friend said, and shook her head decisively.

“Well, I won’t give up! I have to get out of here and find my mother!” She shook the bars again with all her strength, kicked the back of the sphere, leaned her whole weight against it and tugged. She tried everything, furiously and energetically, but in vain. Deep inside herself she knew perfectly well she would not manage it – she had already been caged in

there – but her spirit forced her to keep trying. Exhausted, beaten, she had no choice but to give up. She sat down and took in deep breaths of air.

“You had us all very worried,” Idana said. “We couldn’t wake you up. I don’t know what Oskas gave you, but your body needs rest. Don’t over-exert it.”

“I feel weak, empty… but I’ll feed on rage.”

“Better save it for later,” Romen said, and winked at her.

“And my brother? And the others?”

Nobody answered.

Urda spoke at last. “We don’t know anything about Ikai and the warriors. They might have survived.”

“My brother has survived. I’m positive about that.”

“He went to fight the Enforcers so we could escape,” Romen said. “That was daring, brave and honorable, but I wouldn’t be too hopeful. Nobody survives a confrontation with the Enforcers…” His voice was so soft it was almost a whisper.

Kyra shook her head. “Nobody had ever escaped from the Boundary before. Nobody had ever reached the Eternal City. Nobody had ever returned from there. My brother did all those things, He’s alive, I’m sure of it.”

“We all hope so,” Idana said. “Ikai’s noble and brave. We need him, the Senoca need him. He’ll have survived, so don’t lose hope.”

Kyra nodded. “And the rest of the refugees?”

“They’ve taken them all,” Romen replied. “If I’m not mistaken, to the lower caverns. It doesn’t bode well. We’re kept here in one of the upper ones, for some reason…”

“I see our guest of honor has woken up at last,” said a voice so cavernous that Kyra leapt to her feet. At the entrance of one of the two tunnels which gave access to the chamber, Oskas appeared. He was followed by three Eyes and several Executors.

They all turned to him, filled with fear and wariness. All but one: Kyra, who glared with hatred.

“Guest of honor? What do you want of me, you mangy dog?”

“Be silent and show some respect, you filthy slave!” cried the shrill voice of one of the Eyes.

“If you want me to shut up, come and make me,” Kyra said defiantly, and raised her fist.

Two Executors took a step toward her.

“Stop!” Oskas ordered.

“My lord –”

The master-spy raised his hand. “I’ll deal with her.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

“You should be more careful with that tongue of yours,” Oskas threatened her. “It’s going to cause you a lot of trouble.”

“Hah! You’re not the first one to tell me that.

“You should listen to advice. It’s a valuable virtue.”

“And you should go back to the Eternal City to lick your master’s boots.”

“How dare you!” shrieked another of the Eyes. He took out a disc.

“No!” said Oskas firmly. “She belongs to Lord Asu. She must not be marked.”

“I don’t belong to anybody! Much less to that filthy scum!”

“Show some intelligence, girl. You should never speak of a Golden God like that, least of all the one I serve. It’s one thing to be brave, quite another to die for not thinking about what you say.”

“I’ll speak however I want to about whoever I want to.”

Oskas folded his arms over his powerful torso. “In that case you’ll end up as food for worms. And you’ll have achieved nothing.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. We’ll see.”

“Let me remind you that you don’t have Lord Adamis here to save you.”

“I don’t need anybody to save me. If you don’t let us leave, I swear I’ll tear your guts out, and do the same to that pig of a God you serve.”

“You can threaten me all you want, girl. But I can’t let you offend my lord in public. I’ll have to teach you a lesson, because I can see you’re too pig-headed, and some lessons are only learnt with blood.”

Kyra straightened. “You don’t scare me.”

“That’s because you’re just a child who knows nothing. Because I assure you, you ought to fear me.”

Kyra made a face and stood staring at him with folded arms.

Oskas stretched out both his arms and then let them drop at his sides, open. The lifeless helmet shone briefly. A blackness began to form in the monster’s hands, enveloped them and then uncoiled downwards to the floor, forming two vipers. Kyra watched in awe. She swallowed. She knew the punishment she was about to receive would be terrible. *Me and my big mouth. Why can’t I keep quiet? I’m going to pay for this.*

Oskas’ hands rose to the ceiling, and with a sudden movement he whipped them down. The vipers moved straight towards their prey, growing as they moved forward. Kyra closed her eyes and waited with her whole body in tension. But it was Idana who screamed. Kyra opened her eyes in horror to see that one of the vipers had slipped between the bars and was coiled around Idana’s neck. The other was coiled around Urda’s. Her friends were trying to breathe as the gaping jaws of the vipers threatened to bite their faces.

“No!” she cried. “Please! Stop!”

Oskas was controlling his terrible creation with his outstretched hands. “How would you prefer to see them die? Asphyxia or poisoning? I recommend the second option: the bite barely hurts, and they’d die at once. Strangling’s longer and more traumatic …”

“Please, don’t kill them!”

“You’re not so brave now, are you, little girl?”

Idana fell to one side, her face purple. Urda was fighting the viper’s head, trying to avoid being bitten.

“I’ll do whatever you want, but don’t kill them!”

“I’m just asking you to use your head instead of your fury.”

“I will, I will! Leave them, please!”

Oskas shook his arm hard and freed the two girls. The vipers returned to his hands and coiled around his forearms.

“I trust you’ve learnt your lesson.”

“I have, don’t worry,” Kyra said. She was controlling the wrath streaming through every pore of her body as she watched her friends on the floor, trying to get their breath back.

“Self-control is one of the most precious virtues. Anyone who lacks this quality will soon reach the end of his way, since it will be a short one. Fear, rage, love, pain, can all be controlled, if mind and willpower are strong enough.”

“Why do you preach to me? I’m not one of your Shadows.”

“I see you know of me, and my disciples. Only one person could have told you… someone very close to me… someone who betrayed me.”

Kyra realized her mistake and bit her tongue.

“My dear disciple will pay dearly for her betrayal. I will find Albana, as I found you, have no doubt about that. Her betrayal was painful. It’s still very fresh. Her punishment will be exemplary.”

“You’ll never find her.”

“There’s a long road ahead of you if you’re to find the control you need. Unfortunately your time is up. As for Albana, I’ll deal with her in due course. Such treachery as hers cannot be forgiven. It shows weakness, and I have none of that. You must understand that those who get in the way of my master’s wishes cease to exist. That’s one of my functions, and I never fail. I’m here to make sure Lord Asu’s wishes come true, and the wish of my lord and master is to have you.” He jabbed his finger at her chest.

“If it’s me he wants, if you’ve come for me, all right then,” she said, and spread her arms wide. “Here I am. I won’t resist. Let the others leave. Let my mother leave.”

“That’s impossible. They’ve broken the law of the Gods. They must be punished.”

Fear clawed at Kyra’s stomach. “Where have you put my mother?”

“You’ll see her soon.”

“What have you done to her? Why have you taken her away?”

“I haven’t said I’ve done anything to her. You should pay more attention.” Oskas made a sign to the two Executors, who took Kyra out of her cell with brutal efficiency. Each of them took one of her arms and lifted

her like a straw dummy, then took her away without her feet touching the floor. She kicked and cursed with all her might.

“Let her go!” Romen shouted.

“Don’t harm her!” cried Idana.

“Silence, slaves,” snapped one of the Eyes.

Urda ignored this. “If you hurt her I swear I’ll kill you!”

Kyra turned her head a moment before leaving the chamber and saw two Executors hitting Urda.

“You filthy swine!” she cried helplessly.

They took her down a long, narrow tunnel. After several turns the passage opened out into a strange triangular hall. The floor of the chamber was black, and a rectangular monolith with polished surfaces rose in the center. It was as black as a moonless night, nine feet or so tall. It gave off a strange hum, like a swarm of bees. It seemed to have a life of its own.

Oskas stretched his arm and put his hand on its marble-like surface. A white flash came out of the monolith and illuminated the chamber. Kyra stared wide-eyed, not understanding. The floor began to change color, slowly turning crystal clear.

Suddenly she was able to see the floor below, as if ceiling and walls had turned to glass: not only what was directly under her feet but the whole underground complex. She saw a labyrinth of dungeon-cells, linked by tunnels and filled with sphere-cells. *What is this nightmarish place?*

The floor vibrated and they began to descend, as though they were on a platform descending into the depths of a mine. As they went down, she was able to see each sub-level, and the horror was repeated again and again: each one was packed with dungeons. They went down five levels more before stopping at the deepest. *I can’t believe it. Every floor of this insane place is made up of an infinity of dungeons filled with sphere-cells.* She sighed deeply, puzzling over this. *These dungeons are gigantic. There must be thousands of our people in here. But what for?* This thought, simply the idea of how many slaves must be imprisoned there, filled her with such unease that bile came up to her mouth.

The Gods can’t be planning anything good in these catacombs. I fear the worst.

Oskas made his way into that deepest level, and as they went on Kyra noticed something different. On that final level, the dungeons did not contain sphere-cells as in the other, higher levels, but pods. Pods which Kyra recognized immediately, since she herself had been inside one of them before – in Notaplo's laboratory. They were the pods the Gods used for their experiments…

I'm getting a worse and worse feeling about this place… it's sinister…

They reached the first of the chambers, and here Oskas stopped. The two Executors holding Kyra left her on the floor. In the chamber were a dozen pods which formed a perfect circle around a monolith in the center. This was rectangular, more than fifteen feet tall, black as night. A pipe, equally black, linked each of the pods to the monolith. It was guarded by two Eyes-of-the-Gods.

Oskas turned to Kyra and pointed to one of the pods. Not understanding, she narrowed her eyes to try and make out what was inside it. And then she saw a human figure. She stepped forward and recognized it.

"Mom!"

"Kyra!" came Solma's muffled cry from inside.

Kyra ran to the pod.

"Are you all right?" she cried. She struggled to open the crystal cover, or else break it open. But it was impossible.

"You can't free her. The pods are unbreakable."

"Why's she there? What do you want to do to her?"

"What I want with her is none of your business."

"Let her go, she's only a child," Solma begged Oskas.

"In your eyes she may be, but not in mine. She's a young woman who's powerful, both in blood and in spirit. But she needs to learn a lesson in life, a lesson my master wishes her to learn."

"What lesson?" Kyra asked. She was fearful after what she had seen Oskas do to Idana and Urda.

"A rule which can never be changed: by the grace of the Golden Gods we exist, and to them we belong. All of us: Slaves, Enforcers, and Hybrids. This is an unalterable truth. To them belongs the land we walk on, and everything upon it."

Kyra fixed her eyes on Oskas' helmet. She felt the rage which was consuming her going cold, as if that silver surface were swallowing it.

"May I say what I think?"

Oskas nodded. "With moderation."

"They won't be able to enslave us forever. We'll rise, fight, and one day we'll gain our freedom."

The leader of the Shadows shook his helmeted head from side to side. "A mistake: you'll all die. It's a beautiful dream, a precious ideal, and it will lead you all to death. Ideals have that unfortunate habit."

"Ideals, dreams, will unite us, and one day we'll win."

"Don't you understand that it's useless to confront the Gods? With a snap of their fingers they'll put an end to you and your revolution alike."

"I confronted the God you serve, and I'm still alive."

"You're still alive because another God protected you with his life. Something which has never happened before. No God has ever protected a slave, still less risked his life for one. It's an anomaly. An exception, and as such it confirms the rule. It will never happen again. Listen to my words. If you wish to live, if you wish your mother to stay alive, you have to accept the inevitable: there is no hope. The Gods cannot be defeated."

"I can't accept it. I never will. Your lord God killed my friend, and sooner or later he'll pay for it. For everything he's done, for all the suffering he's caused."

"Who's going to make him pay?

"Me. I will."

"Do you really believe you could kill a God? You? A slave?"

"I don't just believe it, I'm going to do it."

"Kyra…" Solma begged.

"Only a God can kill another God. Not even I, a hybrid with superior power, could do it. Nobody has ever been able to."

"Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done."

"Kyra." Solma said, "don't talk like that, I beg you."

"You should listen to your mother. She's an intelligent woman."

“My mother’s the best of women, a wonderful person. But you don’t understand the point of what I’m saying. You only know the will of your masters. To serve and obey, blindly.”

“You’re wrong again. I know and have known a lot more than you think, more than you can even imagine, because at one point I wasn’t so different from you. My life wasn’t very different from yours. My dreams, my ideals, weren’t so different from yours. But the Golden changed all that and made me into what I am today. And let me tell you, I’m much more than what I was, and I never would have become what I am if I’d gone on with my old life. I would have died a long time ago, as will happen to you, led on by foolish, impossible ideals.”

“You and I have nothing in common. Not before, not now, not ever!”

The master-spy clasped his hands behind him and appeared to meditate for a moment. “It’s time I showed you what the power and technology of the Gods can achieve. Only then will you understand.”

He whispered something to the Executors which Kyra was unable to hear. They both left briskly at once.

“Let her be, I beg you,” Solma said, with tears in her eyes.

“She must learn. That’s what Lord Asu has decided.”

“Leave her, please, for the sake of what you once were.”

“That which I was I am no longer, by the grace of the Gods.”

Kyra was listening to this without understanding what they were talking about.

“If there’s anything of you left within you, I beg you to let her go.”

“There’s nothing left, woman. The Gods made sure of that. I’m an Enforcer in the service of the Golden, nothing more than that.”

“I don’t believe you. There’s something in you still, I know it. I beg you on my knees, let her go.”

“I do what must be done. Before I take her into Lord Asu’s presence.”

“No! I beg you, don’t hand her over to him!”

“It’s my duty. It’s my life.”

Solma burst out weeping.

Kyra did not understand why they were talking like that. She did not know what to think.

The Executors came back together with three Oppressors who were dragging a strongly-built slave behind them.

As they passed Kyra she realized who it was. Her stomach lurched.

“Urda!”

Oskas turned to Kyra. “It’s time to learn a lesson in humility.”

Chapter 26

Kneeling on the hill, Ikai stared at the great door which gave access to the city, far to the north. “This doesn’t look good,” he said.

Albana crouched down beside him. “They seem to have secured the capital. They’re searching everyone that goes in or out. The line of carts is endless.”

“Sesmok, or the Enforcers?”

“Sesmok. He must be looking for us… us, and the resistance…”

“I have to get in somehow. They must have taken Kyra, Mother and the others there.”

“Hmm… your instincts are usually good, but before we go into the wolf’s den we need to be sure…”

“I can’t know for sure.” He reached for the pendant his sister had given him for his birthday, which always hung round his neck. “If I had the Falcon Eye I could locate her the way I did in the Eternal City. But I left it behind in the battle.”

“At the Shelter?”

“Yes.”

“Then forget about it. The Enforcers destroyed the Shelter. They burnt everything down to the foundations. They didn’t leave a thing.”

Ikai nodded ruefully. “How are we going to get in? You’re much better at this than I am.”

“Is that a compliment?” said Albana with a sideways grin.

He looked at her, and for a moment the tension in his chest eased. “You know I’m no good at this kind of thing, but I can tell you, if you keep looking at me that way I’m going to end up losing my head.”

The brunette opened her eyes wide in mock-surprise. “At this rate I’ll make a gentleman out of you,” she said, and smiled even more sensuously.

He shook his head. “You’re impossible. Even in the worst moments you make me blush.”

“I’m what I am, and I’m glad you like me that way. Now let’s concentrate on finding how to get in. First we need to understand what’s going on.”

“And how do we find out?”

She turned and scanned the valley behind them, then pointed. “There.”

Ikai made out the lonely cart in the distance. “All right, I’ll warn the others.”

Drawn by two mules and loaded with barrels, the cart moved along the road towards the capital. All that remained for it to do was leave the forest for the plain which led to the city.

Honus came out from behind a tree and stood in front of it, hands on hips.

At the sight of the giant in the middle of the road, the driver tugged the reins hard. The mules stopped, neighing in protest.

“By the Gods!” he said. He was a middle-aged, bald, chubby man. “What on earth are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“Some people say I’m a bit wrong in the head, yes. But they tend to end up unconscious, with a couple of teeth missing.”

The man straightened, looking frightened. “I didn’t mean to offend you… don’t get me wrong, it’s just that standing in front of the cart like that… there could have been an accident.”

“And an accident’s what there will be if you don’t answer what my friend here’s going to ask you.”

The man, by now thoroughly scared, looked around in all directions.

“Here,” said Karm. He came out from behind another tree, with an arrow ready in his bow.

“By the Moon! Don’t hurt me!”

“That’s not our intention,” Karm said amiably.

The man was trembling like a leaf. “What are you? Pariahs? Don’t kill me, please, I beg you!”

“Take it easy. My friend’s as big as a mountain and as ugly as a toad, but he won’t hurt you if you cooperate.”

“I might anyway,” Honus said. “I need a bit of fun.”

Karm gave him a withering glare. He shrugged and smiled.

“What… what do you want of me? The beer I’m carrying? It’s yours, but let me go.”

“No, we don’t want your beer.”

“I do,” Honus said. He went to check the cargo.

Karm rolled his eyes. “We just want information.”

“Information? I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Very well. What’s going on in the capital? Why’s access restricted?”

“Regent Sesmok has sealed the city. Nobody can enter or leave without authorization, and anyone who does must be searched.”

“Why’s that?”

“Haven’t you heard? These are very dangerous times. The rebels have dared to assault the tributes. They fought the Guard and took the taxes. They shared them out among the people, which is something unheard of. And it’s happened in several counties. Organized attacks, which is unthinkable. And they’ve done sabotages in the county capitals, poisoned the water of the barracks, burnt down stables, and more… All very well–thought-out and executed. It’s said they’re getting ready to rise against the Regent. At first it was just rumors, but now it seems they’ve taken action and everybody knows about it. There is talk of their undercover activities everywhere… there are rebels inciting subversion in the Six Counties. They say a great uprising’s being prepared. The Guard and the Enforcers are after them, they’ve killed a lot of resistance members, and they’re taking reprisals. But the people are with the rebels… they protect them, shelter them and help them. And there are more and more, or so they say. The Regent’s beside himself. He’s ordered a house- to -house search of the capital to find the leaders of the rebellion and execute them in the main square. He’s forbidden people to walk the streets at night, and whoever’s

found outside after midnight is executed on the spot. This is happening in all six capitals. Things are getting very ugly…”

“Just listen to him talk,” Honus said. “And I didn’t even have to prompt him.” He sounded disappointed.

“What’s your name?” Karm asked.

“Lodi.”

“Very well, Lodi. What else is being said?”

“The latest rumors talk about a confrontation between the Heroes and the Enforcers, something never heard of…”

“Where did this happen?”

“That’s the strangest thing of all… they say it was outside the Boundary… can you believe it? Outside… That would confirm what the rebels say, that they can free us, that we can leave the Boundary. Can you imagine? It’s crazy, but more and more people are beginning to believe them.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t even dare to dream. It would be wonderful…”

“Those aren’t the words of a slave, Lodi,” Honus said warningly.

“No, forgive me, you’re right. I thought maybe you… well… you look more like rebels… than Pariahs… And it’s difficult not to get carried away by the optimism, the hope… but you’re right, I’ll keep my opinions to myself …”

“How come you can enter the city?”

“I have a safe-conduct.” He searched in his satchel and took out a parchment which bore the seal of the Guard.

“How did you get hold of this?”

“I work for an important merchant in the capital. He’s from a good family… he got it for me.”

“With this safe-conduct and the cart, we could get in,” Honus suggested.

Karm thought about this, then turned towards the trees.

“The Ring,” came Albana’s voice, although they could not see her.

“Show me your Ring,” Karm said.

The beer-carrier showed it to him.

“The Horse, the symbol of the merchant,”

“Do they check the Rings?”

“Think carefully before you answer,” Honus said. “If you lie to us I’ll break your skull.”

The man nodded several times.

“Hell!” cried Honus.

“Let him go,” came Ikai’s voice.

“You heard,” Karm said.

“Thank you, thank you, you won’t regret it, thank you so much!” He urged his mules and sped on toward the capital.

Ikai and Albana came out of the undergrowth.

“We should have kept him,” Honus said.

“We won’t see him again, don’t worry,” said Ikai. “And we already have the information we needed,”

“Life always has a few nasty surprises in store,” Honus said.

“The giant’s right,” Albana said, “but just let it be. It’s time to think up a plan.”

“Do you have something in mind?” Ikai asked.

“Of course. But let’s go back with the others. It’s time to split up. The four of us’ll go to the city. The others must hide.”

“All right, I’ll talk to them. They’re not going to like it, though. They’ve fought like heroes and come all the way from the Shelter with us. They won’t want to separate now.”

“I understand, but this is a question of infiltration. We can’t take them with us.”

“Very well,” Ikai agreed.

Honus frowned. “If there aren’t going to be any fisticuffs, you won’t need me.”

All eyes turned to him.

“Don’t be so grumpy. I know deep down you want to come,” Karm said.

“Besides,” Albana added, “it’s more than likely I’ll be needing a tough man.”

“Why didn’t you say so before! In that case I’m in.”

It was nighttime by the time they reached the position, two hundred paces from the foot of the wall. They had calculated their point of entry by watching the movements of the Guard who were patrolling the battlements. The four lay flat on the ground behind a fallen tree.

Albana pointed to the sky, where the stars could not be seen. “Dark clouds.”

“That’ll help us,” Ikai said.

“This is the moment.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it,” she said, and gave him a reassuring smile.

But he was not reassured. “Be very careful. If anything should happen to you…”

She put a finger to his lips. “Shhh… nothing’s going to happen to me.”

He was about to say something, but she kissed him with the passion of a hurricane and left him reeling, then set off at a run.

As he watched her go, her silhouette darkened and suddenly melted into the night.

Honus peered over the trunk of the fallen tree. “Where is she? I can’t see her.”

“You won’t see her,” Karm explained. “She’s special… she has skills.”

“I know she’s special. Even a blind man could see that.”

Suddenly her figure appeared against the base of the wall.

“But how is she planning on climbing that damn great wall?”

“Watch,” Ikai said.

Like a black spider, Albana began to climb the wall. Her hands and feet seemed to adhere to the rock as she ascended. Suddenly she disappeared before their eyes.

“By all the wine in the first county!” Honus cried in astonishment.

“Something really special,” Karm agreed.

She certainly was that for Ikai, and in more than one sense. *I can’t lose her. Protect her, Girlai, Father Moon. I beg you, don’t let anything happen to her.*

They waited, staring up at the battlements. Two guards were patrolling the section Albana had climbed. Ikai was uneasy. *If they find her…* At that moment one of the guards disappeared behind the parapet and did not reappear.

“It’s her,” said Karm.

Ikai bit his lip.

A moment later the second guard disappeared. There came the hoot of a barn owl.

“It’s the signal,” said Ikai. “Let’s go.”

They ran, crouching, to the wall, and waited. A rope came down to them.

“It’s too short,” Honus protested.

“That’s why we brought you,” Karm said, and started climbing on to him.

“I knew I could smell a rat. Don’t step on my mouth!”

“Shhh,” Ikai said. He started to climb up over Honus, then over Karm, until he could reach the rope. Not without difficulty, they managed to climb the wall. Albana was waiting at the top beside a watch-tower.

“And the guards?” Ikai asked.

Albana gestured inside the tower. Honus took a look and saw the two guards, dead.

“I think I’ll call you the black widow.”

Albana turned an amused gaze on him. “I like that. Only be careful I don’t sting you by accident.”

“May Oxatsi forbid it,” the giant said, and took a step back.

“And now?” Karm asked.

“We don’t have much time,” Ikai said. “They’ll find the bodies when the watch changes.”

“We’ll follow Ikai’s plan,” Albana said. “I’ll go in search of the resistance. I know where to find a few contacts in the city – well, if they haven’t been killed already, which is quite possible… anyway, I’ll manage. You two guide Ikai to the tavern Romen took you to, where you met Gedrel. He might be there, either he or some of his men. That way we’ll have more chance of success. The important thing is to get in touch with the rebels so they can take us to Gedrel.”

“Right,” Karm said.

She pointed out a dozen Guards in a square nearby. “The guard’s patrolling the city, so be careful.”

“We certainly will,” said Ikai. He looked at her with concern.

Albana winked at him and stroked his cheek, then left at a run and disappeared into the night.

Honus followed her with his gaze. “I’d give my right arm to know how the hell she does that.”

“Better not,” Ikai said. “We need both your arms. Now let’s go. We don’t have much time.”

The tavern was quiet: too quiet. Ikai was restless. He looked around for anything suspicious, but there was nothing: a few regulars, judging by the way they talked about the inn-keeper, and some women of easy virtue who were having no luck.

“Are you sure this is the tavern?”

“Absolutely,” Karm said.

“The last time it was a lot livelier,” said Honus as he looked around. “Still, the whores are the same, not much doubt about that.”

“It must be because of the clampdown by the Guard,” Karm said.

Ikai nodded. “We’ll wait.”

After the second round of beers he started to feel nervous. There was no sign of Gedrel or Albana, and the atmosphere at the tavern was too gloomy. *Stay calm, they’ll come. It’s a matter of time. I must be cool, avoid taking*

any risks. But unfortunately time was precisely what they did not have. He tried not to look at the door of the tavern, to avoid raising suspicions, but with every moment that went by he found it harder not to look. Honus did not lose sight of the women, and smiled with each gulp of beer. Suddenly Karm pointed to the door.

“Look out,” he whispered, and Ikai hoped with all his heart that this was not the Guard looking for them. He looked casually over his shoulder. Two figures wearing dark hooded cloaks were coming towards them, heads down. They were not part of the guard. They came to their table and sat down without a word. Honus growled defiantly, and Karm and Ikai reached for their daggers.

“Easy, it’s me,” said a woman’s sensual voice. They all recognized it immediately.

“Black widow,” Honus said with a smile.

“Albana…” muttered Ikai. He sighed in relief. The brunette pushed her hood back to reveal her wild features.

“Did you miss me?” she said with a wink.

Ikai felt a wave of relief that she was back safe and sound beside him once again. She kept up her usual humor, that innate sarcasm which attracted him so much. That meant everything had gone well. He sighed, and her black eyes reassured him.

“I was worried about you,” he admitted. “It took you a long time.”

She smiled affectionately at him. “You worry too much. Anyway, I brought you a surprise.” She turned to her companion. “That’s why it took me so long.”

The stranger’s hood was pushed back. Ikai held his breath, hoping it would be Gedrel. But it was not, and he was left speechless. He was greeted by eyes turquoise as the sea and a wide smile in a face which had once captured his heart.

“Liri… ana…” he stammered.

“Greetings, Hunter,” she said with a nod, smiling broadly. Her short blonde hair shone in the candlelight and her eyes recalled the immensity of the sea. “It does my heart good to see you again,” she whispered, putting her hand to her heart and leaning over the table so only they might hear.

“But it’d be better if we didn’t use names. There are plenty of indiscreet ears in this city, and the reward on our heads is very high…”

“Of course… excuse me… it was the surprise. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“My friend came for me,” she said, nodding towards Albana. “And when she calls, I come.”

Albana nodded. “We’ve been friends for a long time. Nothing will ever change that.” Her inquisitive eyes were fixed on Ikai as though she were measuring each one of his reactions. Her smile was neither friendly nor sarcastic, but something else, something that made him uneasy. He swallowed. *I’d better tread carefully, or Albana’s quite capable of tearing my heart out if I put my foot in with Liriana… I must act cool toward her, or else I’ll be in a real fix.* As he thought this he could not stop looking at Liriana. He remembered the ordeal they had shared during Kyra’s rescue. Everything that had happened, what they had lived through together, especially the night they had shared, and what it had meant for him. He remembered the absence that followed, and the discovery later on that she was sworn to another. He remembered the pain. All those memories, all those powerful and painful emotions, hit his mind and his stomach. He had to make an effort to hide the turmoil of emotions that surged up in him.

Albana arched one eyebrow. “Cat get your tongue?” she asked with an edge to her voice.

“No… no…. I still can’t believe it’s her,” he said in some confusion. “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“More than a year… a long, hard year,” said Liriana.

“A year in which you’ve done an incredible job organizing the resistance and preparing the people for the uprising,” an old voice said behind them. Startled, they all turned. All except Liriana.

“Relax,” she said. “He’s with me.”

The old man drew a stool close to the table and sat down. Ikai had recognized the voice. There was no doubt it was Gedrel. The old leader of the resistance pushed back his hood.

“How are you, my dear young man?” he said to Ikai.

“Very well, old friend,” said Ikai, and gave him a warm embrace.

“Are you still that same poised, alert young man who saved the life of this crazy old poet?”

“I think so… maybe a little less calculating, a little more impulsive. Every man changes with the experiences he lives through… and you know very well I don’t like being characterized as cold and calculating.”

“I said poised, you have an innate calm which very few men possess. When our paths crossed by the grace of Oxatsi, I saw you fight and kill four men without flinching. Not everybody can do that.”

“Anybody trained to fight can do that. Remember, I was a Hunter.”

“And a very good one.” Gedrel smiled, and the creases in his face deepened. “You look good, which gladdens my soul, and at my age few things make me glad.”

“I’m still in one piece,” Ikai said with a smile.

“By a hair’s-breadth, according to what I heard… the Shelter…. You surprised me, very positively, I have to admit. Only a fool or a brave man who doesn’t mind dying would stand up to the Enforcers in battle. Only a Hero would come out alive… Didn’t your calculating mind warn you it was impossible? I’m sure it did… How is it you chose to fight?”

“I had no choice.”

“A man always has a choice. He can choose to follow his own heart and fight for good, or he can choose to turn his back and let evil triumph. But when all’s said and done, it’s always a choice each man must make. One that you made that day, which drove you to fight the Enforcers.”

“You always read too much into things. I just did what I could to save our people.”

“You tried to save the Shelter from the wrath of the Gods. You tried to protect the refugees with your life in the face of almost certain death. Those are the actions of a leader, of a Hero.”

“I’m no hero…”

“Are you sure? As I interpret it, a Hero, a symbol for the people, is that man who gives everything for his people with his generous, epic acts, with his sacrifice and devotion. I’d say you amply fulfill the definition of a Hero, for your own people, for those you’ve protected on so many occasions, putting your own life in danger without caring about the magnitude of

whatever you faced. What you are is decided by your actions, not your words, or your vision of yourself, and your actions have spoken. Whether you like it or not, they've made you a hero for many. And I'm sure that very soon they'll make you a hero for all the Senoca, and it'll be on the basis of your own merits."

Ikai shook his head, smiling. "I've missed your crazy philosophy of life. I see you're still the same."

"It's the only thing we old fools have left, our philosophy, which we need to pass on to the young ones –" he looked at Liriana – "so they can lead us into a new, glorious future: one which only I dare to dream about, and which I'll certainly never get to see."

"They say weeds never die," Albana said teasingly.

"Very true, my lethal, feline child. But in my case, it would seem I'm not as bad as the Regent and the Gods want me to be, so in all probability they'll end up pulling me up out of the earth, and then this crazy philosopher and poet will cease to exist."

"Don't say that," Liriana scolded him. "We need you. Without you we're lost."

"Thank you, little one, but you're much better prepared for what's coming than you think. You'll be able to carry on without this old dreamer."

"You're our leader, the seed which has spread the message our people are now taking to their hearts."

"I'm just an old dreamer, an epic poet who's trying to strike the spark of freedom in the hearts of a hopeless people. If the breeze is favorable, that spark will become a flame which can never be extinguished: a dream of freedom for the Senoca, so we may go back to the Mother Sea and live in freedom and happiness for the rest of our lives."

Liriana put her hand on her heart. "It's what we all wish for, and that's why we follow you. That's why we need you."

"Little one, the message is already flying over the Six Counties. The wind carries it to the hearts of all the Senoca. It can't be stopped. My work is done. Now it's the turn for strong young leaders, like those I see sitting around this table, who'll finish what we started."

Liriana clenched her fist. "We'll rise up and bring down Sesmok and the Enforcers he serves," she said with such conviction that Ikai could only

admire her courage and faith in the cause. He knew she was a born leader.

Gedrel watched him for a moment. “You haven’t come because of the rebellion, have you, young hunter?”

“I’m here because of my family. They’ve been captured, along with those who were fleeing from the Shelter. The Enforcers took them and destroyed everything. A lot of people died.”

“That’s terrible news,” Gedrel said with a deeply-felt sigh. “The Shelter was a beacon of hope for everyone, for the cause. Losing it, losing the refugees, is a terrible thing. I’m sorry the dream came to an end. I know how important it was for you.”

“My family and my friends are even more so,” said Ikai.

“Your sister Kyra is very important for all of us. She’s the key to ensuring that this revolution which has begun and cannot now be stopped doesn’t fail.”

“Kyra?” Ikai asked in surprise.

“Indeed. You may not see it, but that young woman is very special, the personification of the fire which will take hold in the hearts of our people: the flame which will kindle the rebellion and cause the Regent and the Enforcers to burn.”

“Not if they kill her first.” Albana said.

Gedrel scratched his chin, and for a moment his gaze was distant. “This little meeting comes to a critical moment, not just for us here but for our people, for all the Senoca. The path to rebellion is becoming clearer. We’ll only reach freedom, justice and happiness if we all join together and fight for them, shoulder to shoulder, side by side.”

“I’ll do whatever has to be done,” said Ikai.

“I’m with him,” said Albana.

“Us too,” Karm and Honus put in.

“Excellent. In that case the first thing we have to do is find out where they’re keeping your sister and the others. It must be somewhere here in the city. Our agents would have let us know if they’d been taken somewhere in the counties. No, they must have brought them here. And I can only think of two places where they might be: in the cells at Sesmok’s palace, or in the Dungeons of Oblivion.”

“That’s the most likely thing,” said Liriana. “They’re definitely not in the Guards’ barracks. I’ve got people under cover there, passing out information.”

Ikai glanced at Albana. “If they’re in the Dungeons of Oblivion I can go there. I’ve already been inside once before.”

“I’m afraid, my calculating young friend, that won’t be possible now. Because of your break-in, the Enforcers have doubled their security. The place is swarming with Executors. You wouldn’t be able to sneak in.”

“He wouldn’t, but I would,” said Albana.

“It’s too risky,” Liriana said.

“It’s the only way of knowing whether they’re there or not, and what they’re planning to do with them.”

Ikai felt divided. He did not want Albana to risk her life, but on the other hand his mother and sister needed them both.

Gedrel intervened. “If they’re holding them in the palace, we’ll know. We have undercover agents in the service. I’ll let it be known among our agents that we’re looking for them. If they’re there we’ll soon know. As for the Dungeons of Oblivion, I fear they’re the domain of the Enforcers and we have no way of knowing what goes on there, or who they may be holding. What Albana’s proposing, though it’s heroic, is more or less suicide. If they’re holding them, they’ll know we’ll make an attempt to find them. They’ll be waiting for us. It’s risky in the extreme.”

“I realize that, but it’s the only way.”

“I need to think,” said Ikai. “Let’s not rush things.”

At that moment the inn-keeper approached Gedrel and whispered something in his ear, then went back to the bar straight away to carry on impassively with his chores.

Gedrel stood up. Urgently he said: “We have to leave. There’s a patrol on its way here. Follow me.”

They followed him to the back of the tavern. He opened a heavy wooden door with an iron key. Inside was a room with a staircase which led them down to the cellar.

“Make way for the Guard! We’re carrying out a search!” they heard.

“Come on,” Gedrel urged them.

“There’s no way out,” growled Honus.
Gedrel pointed, and they saw a trapdoor.
“Where does it lead to?” Ikai asked.
“To the sewers,” Gedrel said with a smile.
Honus twitched his nose. “Sewers? Ugh!”
“The way to freedom is not a pretty one. Let’s go!”

Chapter 27

Kyra yelled with rage and ran to her friend.

The Oppressors were controlling Urda by tugging the whips they had coiled around the brave woman's neck and arms. She was resisting as best she could, her face purple for lack of air, her brow furrowed with frustration at being unable to use her arms.

Two Executors blocked Kyra's way and held her firmly.

"Let me go, you bastards!"

"It would be better if you didn't resist," Oskas said. "What's about to happen is inevitable."

"If you hurt her I'll kill you! I swear I'll kill you!"

"That's precisely the spirit I have to subdue. You must learn that resistance – confrontation with the Gods – leads only to pain and death. If I have to break your spirit to teach you, I will."

"Please let them go," Solma pleaded.

"That I cannot do. My Lord Asu has charged me with a mission, and I must see it through."

Urda had turned her head towards Kyra. "Don't… give… up!" she managed to stammer.

"No! Leave her alone!" Kyra cried, and fought back so hard she almost broke free.

"Let her watch what's about to happen," Oskas said.

The Executors forced Kyra to kneel. Each placed one hand on her shoulder and pushed her down with brutal strength, while with the other they held her arms behind her and twisted them so that she could not move out of pain.

"Put her in the pod," the master spy ordered them.

The Oppressors led Urda to one of the pods. In a last attempt to free herself she pulled with both arms and two of the Oppressors lost their hold on her. But the third gave a tremendous yank on the whip coiled round her neck and brought her down. They pushed her inside the pod, freed the whips from her body and closed the lid.

“It’s time to start,” Oskas said to the two Eyes-of-the-Gods who were waiting impassively beside the central monolith. Although they wore the typical helmet of their kind, their clothes were black and silver, something which Kyra had never seen before. On their hands they wore golden gauntlets. The purpose of these Enforcers was different, specialized, and she felt it would bring only pain and suffering.

The two Enforcers nodded and turned to the pod. Urda hammered on the cover with all her strength, but it was unbreakable. The two Eyes calibrated the artifact by moving different levers on the metal sides. When they activated runes of Power on the upper part, the pod began to glow with a soft silver light. When they had finished, they turned to Oskas.

“The pod is ready,” one of them shrilled.

Oskas nodded.

The Enforcers now stood on either side of the monolith and placed their gloved hands on the shining surface. Two golden circles surrounded them, rotating over them, and began to interact with the object of Power. A low buzzing filled the chamber, like a distant litany. Kyra felt goose-bumps. Silver flashes were emitted from the monolith at different levels and intervals. Incomprehensible runes slid along the four surfaces in all directions.

“What House, my lord?” the Eye asked.

“The House of Aureb, the House of my Lord Asu.”

The two Enforcers manipulated the monolith, and suddenly the symbol of the House of Aureb appeared on it. It gleamed with the golden sheen of the Gods.

“What are you doing?” cried Kyra.

Oskas ignored her.

“What Class, my lord?”

Oskas looked at Kyra, then at Urda. “Such a magnificent specimen… we can’t afford to waste it. It’s unusual to find someone so strongly-built among the slaves. Class: Custodian.”

The Enforcers manipulated the monolith again, and under the symbol of the House of Aureb there appeared a new symbol, that of the guardian.

“Leave her alone!”

“It’s useless to shout and resist, child.”

The buzzing intensified until it was disturbing, then finally downright painful. Kyra bowed her head and shook it, but the sound pierced her ears and she could hardly think. The pod began to fill with a greenish liquid which first covered Urda’s feet and ankles, then slowly rose to her neck. She kept beating on the lid and walls of the pod with all her might, but to no avail. Finally a gas came to fill the pod, clouding her neck and head. Her resistance began to weaken, her arms fell to her sides, until in the end her eyes were half-closed, her jaw slack.

“Urda! What are they doing to you!”

“She’s paralyzed.”

A fearful anguish clutched at Kyra’s chest. *He’s going to kill her! By Oxatsi, he’s going to kill her!*

Suddenly a hundred silver rods rose up inside the pod and advanced slowly until they had pierced Urda’s entire body: starting at her feet, then up her legs, body and arms as far as her neck, as though a hundred silver needles had pierced a pin-cushion.

“Noooo!” was Kyra’s desperate cry.

“What you are about to witness is the Power of the Gods. A power so great and exceptional that the mere idea of rebelling against it is both useless and suicidal.”

Oskas raised his arm, and the Eyes activated the monolith. The pipe that linked the monolith to the pod swelled, and a new substance, ochre this time, entered the pod. Urda’s body began to react at the contact with it. Her skin began to lose its natural color, and turned metallic and sickly. Her body swelled as though reacting to an allergy.

The Master Spy went over to the pod, hands behind his back, and watched Urda. “This conversion process usually lasts between three and

five days and nights. Many don’t come through. The conversion ratio is quite low, which is a real shame. Although it’s understandable, as the process is traumatic and painful. Only those with above-average health and constitution manage to survive. Luckily your friend meets both requirements, even exceeds them. You don’t need to worry. She’ll probably survive.”

At that moment Kyra realized what Oskas was about to do. *He can’t do that, he can’t transform her, it’s not possible!* She shook her head at the horror of it. As she did so, another thought struck her. *They aren’t human. They’re Enforcers, not human beings.* Her mind was struggling between what her eyes and understanding showed her, and the concept that the Enforcers were a sub-species of the Gods, distinct from men. *It cannot be! That would be an abomination!*

The monolith began to flash, and strange runes appeared and disappeared on it.

“Do we inject, my lord?”

“Go ahead.”

The Eyes-of-the-Gods manipulated the monolith. The rods embedded all over Urda’s body turned black. A liquid the same color began to enter her body. Flesh and veins took on the same tone.

“Noooooo! Please!”

Urda’s body began to shake uncontrollably, but the rods held it in position. The substance she was floating in was turning ochre, and the transformation was beginning to have an effect on her body: it expanded, with muscles and veins swelling disproportionately. Her skin was turning a deeper ochre, with the veins now swollen and black.

“Your friend is strong. I like that. Look on the power of the Gods, look on the futility of rebelling against them.”

“Nooooo, stop!”

“It’s too late. If I stopped now, your friend would die. The conversion must be completed.”

“I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll kill you!”

“I’ll leave you now, so that you can witness the process and think about it. I’ll be back when it’s over. For your own good, I hope you’ll learn your

lesson.”

“You’re insane! You won’t make me change what I think!”

“You’re wrong once again, child. I can change what you think, what you feel and who you’ll serve to the end of your days. I can turn you into that” – he indicated one of the Eyes – “just by putting you in one of those pods. Don’t tempt your fate.”

“Bastard!”

Oskas turned to Solma. “Make your daughter understand, or it’ll be the end of her.”

Solma bowed her head, and tears ran down her cheeks.

The master-spy turned toward the exit. “Don’t let her miss a single detail,” he ordered the Executors.

For three days and nights Kyra watched her friend suffering an agonizing torment while her body changed under the effects of the corrupting liquid she was submerged in, and the black poison she was being injecting with. She saw her shake with pain, convulse uncontrollably, cry out in muffled desperation, and with every moment of that torture another piece of Kyra’s heart broke. The Executors forced her to witness the torment as Oskas had ordered. Solma, now out of the pod, tried to comfort her with tender words, but to no avail. They were killing her friend slowly in front of her, and there was nothing she could do. She was powerless, and it was eating at her soul. During the few moments she was able to sleep, her dreams turned to nightmares, at which point she would be hit by an Executor to be woken up and brought back to reality, which was only another, still more horrible, nightmare.

The sight of her friend’s torture made her feel enormously guilty. Urda’s body was no longer hers. It had been transformed into that of an Enforcer. It was stronger, more muscular, bigger than before. Her skin was now ochre, her veins black and swollen. Even her face was changing: the black corruption had spread up her neck and her face had broadened. She had also lost all her hair. She looked like a muscular yellow-brown giant with some

lethal illness coursing through her veins. But one thing was still intact: her eyes, which were unchanged.

Suddenly Urda closed them and lay there calmly, as though she had ceased to suffer. This worried Kyra. *Is she dead?* The monolith flashed, and a rune appeared at the top. *No, she can't be dead. She's the strongest woman I've ever known. She has to survive.*

"What's happened, Mother?"

"I don't know, my child. Hold on."

"What has happened is that the process of transformation has been completed," said Oskas. He had appeared from nowhere, as if taking shape out of the gloom of the ceiling. For an instant Kyra thought she saw him descending, suspended in the air.

"Is she alive?" she asked in anguish.

Oskas looked at the Eyes, who nodded. "She is."

"Thanks be to Oxatsi!" cried Solma.

"She's a magnificent specimen. She only needed three days."

"She's no specimen! She's Urda!"

"No. Her body isn't that any longer. And soon her mind won't be either."

"No! What else are you going to do to her? Let her be!"

"I'm going to complete the conversion."

"You're a monster!"

"Oh, I'm much more than that, even though you're unable to appreciate it," said Oskas. He turned to Urda. "Let's finish it."

A new humming filled the hall. The rods embedded in Urda's body drew back slowly. She remained suspended in the ochre liquid which covered her. There was an abrupt *pop,* and the liquid drained away through another pipe. Urda collapsed on to the floor of the pod.

"Take her out and complete the process."

The Oppressors seized Urda and placed her on a black marble table. She was now so large and heavy that it took four of them to move her. They shackled her hands and feet, and Oskas went to examine her.

"Excellent. Just as I hoped."

“You bastard! Stop it!”

“Remember, I can still kill her if I choose to.”

Kyra bit her tongue. Bitter, helpless tears ran down her cheeks.

“The helmet,” Oskas ordered, and one of the Eyes brought the two halves of a Custodian’s helmet.

“No, please…” Solma implored him.

“It must be done. It’s the only way she’s going to learn.”

“I’ll do whatever you want,” Kyra begged, “but stop it, please, stop…”

“I’m pleased to note that you’re beginning to see the light.” Oskas took hold of the back of the helmet, raised Urda’s head and neck and placed it on her.

“Please…” Kyra begged, sobbing.

Oskas took no notice. “The disc,” he said, and held out his hand.

The Eye-of-the-Gods on his right handed him a disc the size of a cherry. It was golden, and completely flat. Oskas placed it on Urda’s forehead, between her eyes, which opened at that moment. He pressed it against her forehead, and there was a metallic click. The disc began to turn like a screw, penetrating flesh and bone.

“Look at your friend for the last time. Once the disc’s implanted, she’ll cease to be who she was and become a faithful Enforcer of the Gods. Her mind, her being, will belong to them. Forever.”

Kyra looked into her friend’s eyes, and Urda gazed back at her. She did not seem to be feeling pain. Her gaze was one of peaceful recognition. Kyra was sobbing desperately.

“Urda… my friend…” was all she could say before tears choked her.

Urda looked at her one last time, proudly, and clenched her fist hard as though telling her to keep fighting.

There was a new click, and the disc was left embedded in her forehead.

Oskas activated it, and it flashed with the golden of the Gods.

“Now she’s one of us,” said the master-spy to Kyra, and showed her Urda’s eyes. They had turned completely golden.

“Nooooo!” Kyra screamed. She tried to reach her friend, but the Executors pushed her down on to the floor and held her there. She tried to

fight, but she had no more strength; she was empty.

Oskas picked up the front of the helmet and held it above Urda's head.

"Seal it," he said to the Eyes-of-the-Gods.

"You didn't have to…" Kyra said from the floor. Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Oh, but I did. You had to learn that nothing can be done against the Gods. That those who rebel end up dead, or like your friend. That's a rule you need to learn. And in your case, it could only be the hard way."

"Why so much suffering?" Solma put in. "Why kill her friend so that she has to bear that on her conscience?"

"Look at your daughter now. She's broken. Broken by agony and suffering. She's learnt the lesson, and she'll never forget it. It'll always be with her."

"It's a cruel lesson. Abominable."

"So it may be, but it's a lesson which will save your daughter's life. You don't see it now, but I assure you it's so. One day, very soon, that lesson will save her life. And you'll have to thank me for what I've done."

Solma bowed her head and shook it. "Will I have to thank you for saving the life of your own daughter, Siul?"

Kyra's head whipped towards her mother. "What are you saying? It's impossible!"

"Don't ever utter that name in my presence. I'm no longer that man. The Gods gave me a new existence; they made me into someone superior. They've taught me the Golden way, given me a divine purpose to follow. One I shall attain."

"What purpose could be stronger than your own family, than your own blood?"

"He's not my father! Tell me he isn't, Mother! Tell me my father's dead, that he's not that monster!"

Solma looked at Kyra with tears in her eyes and nodded. "He's your father," she said full of pity and regret

"No! I refuse to believe that! He can't be!"

“I was a man, but not just any man. I was a hybrid, one with the Power. They made me into an Enforcer. But one day, not very distant, I’ll become one of them. One day I’ll become a Golden.”

“You’re crazy! You’ll never be one of them!” Kyra yelled.

“Inside you there must still be something of Siul,” Solma said to him, “some trace of who you once were, no matter how slight...”

“You’re wrong, woman. Now I’m Oskas, and when I ascend I’ll be a Golden. There’s nothing left in me of that weak man I once was!

“For the good of your soul, I hope there is.”

Oskas laughed. A deep, disdainful laugh. “Don’t you worry about my soul, the Gods hold it. It’s already doomed. But remember my words, woman: today I’ve saved your daughter’s life, our daughter’s life.”

“I’m not your daughter, you miserable freak!”

“Take her away and lock her up. Keep her well guarded. I don’t want any surprises, and she’s not to be trusted.”

The Executors nodded.

“As for you, Solma: I can do nothing more. The Regent has plans for all you captured rebels. I’ll give you to him, since my mission was to capture Kyra and that’s what I’ve done. You might survive, I don’t know, although the chances are slim.”

“You swine!” cried Kyra from the floor, broken in body and soul.

“You’d better save your energy, child. We leave tomorrow for the Eternal City. Lord Asu has been waiting for your arrival for some time now. He’ll be very pleased.”

Kyra opened her eyes in terror. She had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. She felt empty, and her chest was deeply painful. She looked around and found she was a prisoner. She had no idea how long she had slept, but she guessed it could not have been much. She had been shut inside a sphere-cell again. Three Oppressors and two Executors stood guard along the walls of the chamber. Oskas would not allow her to escape; he had made sure of that. But she had to try. She had to get to Ikai, who would

be searching for her. She could not allow Oskas to take her to that monster Asu. Thinking about Oskas made her stomach lurch.

It just can't be. I refuse to believe it, even though Mother said so, She breathed in deeply in an attempt to calm herself. *Focus on trying to escape, that's the important thing now.*

She stretched her hands through the bars. "Water, please..." she pleaded.

None of the Enforcers moved.

Damn brainless Enforcers. It's not going to work. "I'm dying of thirst... If I die Oskas won't like it, not to mention Lord Asu..."

But none of them moved.

An Eye-of-the-Gods appeared through the entrance tunnel and came over to her.

"Tricks won't help you to escape."

"It's not a trick. If I don't drink, I'll die."

"Weak, stupid slaves," he said in his shrill voice. "I'm in charge of you, and you won't die of thirst." He went out and came back shortly afterwards with a bowl of water. "Here," he said.

"If you opened the sphere I'd be able to drink more easily."

The Eye let out a shriek, a mixture of a growl and a laugh. "If you want the water, take the bowl and drink as best you can. Only Oskas will open that cell. Those are his orders."

Kyra clenched her jaw. She looked upwards, cursing the heavens, and saw something unusual. Fog was floating beneath the ceiling of the chamber. She blinked hard. *I'm so exhausted I can't see straight,* she thought.

"Do you want the water or not, slave?" the Eye-of-the-Gods asked. He sounded annoyed.

"Give it to..." she started to say, when she saw something that left her speechless.

The fog which covered the ceiling began to spread downwards into the chamber: a thick fog which expanded as it came down. Alarmed at the sight of this strange phenomenon, the Enforcers reached for their weapons. Suddenly a figure in a gray cloak appeared floating within the fog. It

descended rapidly to the floor and landed with the lightness of a feather, then remained crouching in the center of the chamber.

Kyra watched, her eyes wide.

The Enforcers raised their weapons: their whips for the Oppressors, their spears for the Executors, a disc for the Eye.

The stranger spread his arms wide and made a circular movement with them. At the same time a whitish substance flew from his hands and enveloped the Enforcers. The Oppressors were thrown into the air and hit the walls with massive force, breaking their bodies in the process. The Executors crashed into each other with a dull crack, breaking their backs as they did so. All died in the blink of an eye.

The figure stood up and turned to the Eye-of-the-God. The Enforcer tried to use his Disc, but the stranger's gloved hand made a gesture. A thread of the strange fog struck the object, which flew out of the Eye's hand. Then it coiled around his neck. There was a *crack*, and the Eye collapsed to one side.

Kyra had already seen that type of Power before, in a friend. But this fog was white, and more powerful.

"Albana? Is it you?"

The figure did not reply, but instead pointed at the bars. Instinctively Kyra drew back. The bars flew off into the air.

"You've come... to free me?" she asked hesitantly.

The figure nodded.

She got out of the cell but stopped. "I won't go anywhere if you don't tell me who you are."

The figure raised a hand and made a downward gesture. The fog sank to the floor and enveloped them completely. Kyra could barely see a thing. The figure came to stand in front of her, very close, almost touching her. Then she realized it was very tall. It could not be Albana. She began to feel nervous. The hood fell back, and almond eyes in a beautiful golden face looked into her own.

"By Oxatsi, Ada—!"

His hand covered her mouth. "Shh," he said, and put a slender finger to his lips. Kyra understood and nodded.

The mental message reached her with absolute clarity: *I've come to rescue you. We must get away before we're discovered.*

Kyra smiled, filled with indescribable joy. She nodded.

Adamis put his arm around her waist, and they rose into the fog, in search of freedom.

Chapter 28

Honus made a face and covered his nose and mouth with his great paw of a hand. “It smells like a dead rat here!” he protested.

“And something else, much worse,” Karm said. He was looking around with narrowed eyes, trying to make out their surroundings in the gloom of the sewers. “But don’t grumble. We’re safe, and that’s what matters.”

Ikai was walking on beside Albana, who for some reason remained curiously quiet, as though she were angry with him. He had tried asking her what was troubling her, but had only got a cryptic *you ought to know* for an answer, and to be honest, he had no idea. All the same, he suspected it had something to do with Liriana, even though he had said and done nothing to upset Albana. Or at least, so he thought.

Gedrel and Liriana were in the lead. They seemed to know that gloomy labyrinth of tunnels and channels well. Ikai was taking in every detail of the strange underground world they were losing themselves in. He had the clear feeling he was entering the gloomiest and most inaccessible part of the city.

“I never thought I’d find myself wishing I was back in the mines,” Honus burst out in a fresh protest, “but I swear today’s the day. This place stinks! It’s disgusting!”

“And that, my dear brute,” Gedrel said, giving him a slap on his back, “is precisely why we’re safe here. The Guard doesn’t come down to the sewers, or at least this part, the foulest-smelling and hardest to reach. Even the Hunters can’t follow our trail down here. For some unknown reason the Falcon Eye doesn’t work underground. A very significant discovery, which has driven us to ‘colonize’ this lost, hidden and ill-smelling world.”

Liriana went on towards a collapsed section of one of the tunnels. Ikai watched her in puzzlement, there was no way through.

“Can you help me?” she asked Albana.

The brunette nodded, and between the two of them they shifted one of the blocks of rock to make a way through.

“It’s false,” Liriana said as she saw their looks of puzzlement. “It’s been put there on purpose.”

Gedrel went in through the opening, and they all followed him. Afterwards they replaced the fake rock.

“This place is now our secret home, where we meet and organize and create our base,” said the leader of the resistance.

He went around a corner and spread his arms wide to show them a great section of the cave-like tunnel filled with tents and fires on both sides of the channel where the ill-smelling liquid flowed. More than a hundred people were living there: they had set up a campsite with all the basic needs for subsistence.

“Do you live here?” Honus asked in horror.

“This is the heart of the resistance,” Gedrel said with an ironic smile.

“But you can’t even breathe here! I’m going to be sick and pass out.”

Gedrel laughed. “Hah! Didn’t you want to join the resistance? Well, this is the glorious destiny that awaits you.”

He jabbed his thumb at Karm. “I didn’t want to join you. He’s the one with the crappy ideals. I only stay with him out of habit, too many years together in the mines, and mostly so he doesn’t get killed.”

“To find freedom and return to the lap of Mother Sea, we must first suffer the drawbacks of this existence we’re sworn to.” Gedrel said. “The one who suffers the lash of the Oppressors, who’s forced to hide in the sewers because his life has no value to the Gods, appreciates the true meaning of freedom infinitely more. Don’t expect the rich merchants of the capital, the Regent’s friends and relatives, the privileged and powerful castes, to join us in our revolution. Those who suffer, those who flee from death, those you see here, are the ones who’ll lead us on our path to rebellion, and from there we’ll gain our freedom. One day soon we’ll rise against the Regent and his people, and it’ll be from this very place.”

“You can count on me,” Karm said. “I’ll put up with whatever I have to. This has to stop. We have to put an end to Sesmok’s tyranny and throw out the Enforcers. We have to make them pay for all the evil and suffering they’ve caused our people. We have to find freedom.”

“And if possible, try to stop them killing us all,” said Honus. “Although come to think of it, this place will probably do it first.” He grunted at the rebels on guard duty at the camp entrance.

Ikai smiled. Honus was always complaining, but in the end he always did the right thing.

Gedrel’s tent was a large one, made of linen and patched in various colors, probably picked out of the garbage. They made themselves at home and rested. Furniture and basic comforts were limited to unsteady stools, worn-out cushions and moth-eaten rugs. It was a home made out of oddments and leftovers, but curiously enough it was cozy in the candlelight. At the sight of the other tents along the channel Ikai had the same sense of welcome. A peaceful silence reigned there, with only muffled murmurs audible. A singular peace and soothing harmony surrounded them. Little by little they were getting used to the smell, and it did not take Honus long to start asking for some food, which Liriana brought them. The camp had a pantry with barrels of water, wine and beer. Further back were sacks of wheat, barley and vegetables.

“We don’t have meat or fish, and there’s only some overripe fruit,” Liriana said apologetically. “They’re luxuries we can’t get hold of.”

“Don’t worry, it’s more than enough,” Ikai said as he took the plate she was offering him. Their eyes met, and for an instant remained locked. Neither of them looked away, with Ikai’s oddly-contrasting eyes boring into her turquoise ones. He felt strange, nervous, and something was beginning to rebel inside him.

“Will you please pass me the water-skin?” came Albana’s voice, cold and hard.

“Yes, of course,” Liriana said and turned to get it.

The moment passed, and he relaxed. He was about to eat when he noticed Albana’s black eyes glaring at him. She frowned and half-closed her eyes, and her glare turned to icy fury. Ikai started to sweat. *I’m in big trouble.*

They were so hungry they gulped down everything Liriana put in front of them. Honus had a second helping, and even Albana ate an extra portion, as if she knew she would be needing it for what was coming. Ikai decided it was a good idea and did the same. Honus fell asleep on the floor and began

to snore. Karm followed his example soon after. They were so different and at the same time so similar. They had spent so long together that the actions of the one mirrored those of the other, like twins. Gedrel and Liriana excused themselves and disappeared among the crowd of rebels to deal with the thousand and one things they had to arrange. Albana leaned back, and Ikai squatted in front of her so that their faces were only a breath apart. Their eyes met.

“Why are you angry?” he whispered.

“You know very well why.”

He looked away. “I was surprised to see her, that’s all.”

“It’s more than that, and you know it.”

“I swear there’s nothing more.”

“Your eyes don’t lie.”

“I can’t tell what my eyes are saying or what you see in them, but you’re reading more than is there. I was surprised to see her after all this time. There’s nothing more to it than that.”

“You look at her as if she’d stolen your soul.”

He sighed. “Once that was true. But it was long ago, and it’s over now.”

“Is it? Or is the flame still alive?”

Ikai took her hands in his own. “My soul belongs to you and no-one else. What’s past is past. We owe ourselves to the present. My now and my future are both you.”

Albana stared hard at him, reading his soul in his eyes. “It’d better be that way. I’m not a woman who forgives betrayal.”

“I know that,” Ikai said with a shy smile.

“Choose well…”

Ikai nodded. “Am I forgiven?” he asked teasingly.

Finally she smiled. “For now. But I’m watching you. If you slip up, I’ll make you pay.”

“I’m sure you will.”

They held each other closely and kissed, each fearing the loss of the other. Exhaustion overwhelmed them, and they fell asleep.

Gedrel’s voice woke them all. “Come on, sleepy-heads. Time to wake up!”

Ikai opened his eyes. “How long have we been asleep?”

“You’ve slept all night. Morning came a long while ago up on the surface.” He jabbed his finger upwards.

“You should’ve woken us up before,” said Ikai.

“Oh, you youngsters think you’re indestructible, but you forget your bodies need rest. Particularly in these difficult times. We don’t know what awaits us, so the more rested we are, the better we’ll be able to face whatever fate puts in our way.”

“I’m very grateful,” Honus said as he stretched. “I’ve slept like a king. In a sewer, but like a king.”

“Any news?” Albana asked. “I need to set off for the Dungeons of Oblivion.”

“That’s exactly what we wanted to talk about,” Liriana said as she came into the tent.

“What’s happening?”

“Our spies in the palace have reported back. Something’s up. Something big.”

“What?” Ikai asked. He was getting worried. “What did you find out?”

“During the night they transferred a number of people to the cells in the Regent’s palace.”

“Is it them? Do you think it’s them?”

“It seems that way. I can’t think of anybody else it could be. There haven’t been either Summonses or Quotas these last few weeks. And they’re not from the mines either. Our agents would have informed us. We haven’t been able to find out where they’ve come from, but it was Enforcers escorting them, not the Guard.”

“Then most likely they’ve come from the Dungeons of Oblivion,” Albana said.

“That’s what I think too,” said Liriana.

“In that case, you needn’t risk yourself,” Ikai said to Albana.

“Are you sure they’re in the palace?” she asked Liriana.

“Positive. We have eyes on them.”

Albana nodded. “Right. Then we change plans.”

“Sesmok’s up to something,” Gedrel said. “He’s mobilizing the Guard. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“That vermin’s never up to anything good,” said Liriana.

“We need to get ready and be alert,” Gedrel said. “All the men and women need to go up to the surface and infiltrate the city. We have to find out what’s happening.”

“Very well,” Liriana said. “I’ll take care of that.” She left to pass on the orders.

Two hours later, the sewers were deserted. All that remained were groups of children. With scared faces they listened to older people telling them epic stories to calm them. But even the smallest of them could feel something stirring.

Gedrel drew Ikai to one side and spoke to him in a whisper. “Tumultuous times are coming, young Hunter. I feel it in my old bones.”

“You’re not often wrong.”

“The day I’ve been waiting for is coming closer.”

“The rebellion?”

“Yes. Soon the Senoca will rise united against the tyrant, against the Enforcers.”

“I don’t think that day’s so close. I don’t see the people ready. Fear’s made slaves of them.”

“They only need the oil that’ll set off the spark in their hearts and turn it into a flame. When it happens, and it will, they’ll rise.”

“And the Regent and the Enforcers will crush them. You know that. It’s one thing to dream about a revolt, a very different one to make it happen.”

“That’s why I need you, young Hunter.”

“Me? You already have Liriana and the rest on your side. Even my sister. Why d’you need me?”

“I need you for two reasons, my friend. First, because the seven heroes must rise united against tyranny. The people expect it. You must lead them: the seven Heroes of the Senoca, those who defied the Gods themselves. That way the people will rebel and follow you. They won’t follow a decrepit old man like me. They need Heroes who can fight against Gods and inspire them.”

Ikai understood. He knew the importance of symbolism. But to rise against the Gods still seemed to him against all logic. It was impossible. And before and above all else, he was a rational man.

“And the second?”

“The second… yes… You see, of the seven heroes only one has the capacity for coolly making those difficult decisions that will be necessary. Decisions which will affect thousands of lives. Decisions that will have to be made with the cool-headed detachment which only one of them possesses.”

“Me?”

“Yes, my young friend. That’s always been your signature. A gift very few possess. I knew it the moment we first met.”

“It won’t be necessary. You’re there to make the decisions.”

“And if I can’t? What if I’m captured, or wounded, or ill? Take a good look at me: I’m an old man who finds it harder to move every day. I’m nothing but skin and bones, and I haven’t much time left. Age gives you wisdom, but it takes away your life. Someone has to guide the people, someone with a good head, when I no longer can.”

“Liriana’s your successor, and one of the heroes too. She’s the one who could make the decisions.”

“True. She’s a born leader and she’ll lead them well, with both courage and honor. She works ceaselessly for the cause and does amazing work. But she’s not a thinker like you, she’s no strategist, her heart takes over. Something like that happens with your sister. She’s all fire, she’d get the people to rise up in arms all by herself, but she’d lead them straight to the enemy, and that probably wouldn’t be the best option. I need a thinking head, and that’s you. Your sister’s the soul and you’re the brain. I need you both. The Senoca need you both.”

“I can’t promise you anything… right now I have to rescue my own people… later on we’ll talk. I’m not refusing, but I have to think about it. You’re asking a lot of me.”

“I know. And I wouldn’t do it if it weren’t necessary.”

At the sound of running footsteps echoing against the walls, they both turned. It was Liriana, followed by several men.

“What’s the matter?” Gedrel asked, sounding troubled.

“It’s Sesmok. The horns are calling for a meeting. You can’t hear them down here, but they’ve been calling for an hour.”

“In the Great Square?”

“Yes. The whole city’s gathering. The Guard’s going round house by house. Everybody in the capital has to attend. There’s something serious afoot. This isn’t normal.”

“Most likely there’ll be an announcement,” Gedrel said thoughtfully.

“What’s he going to announce?” Ikai asked.

“That’s what we need to find out,” Gedrel said, trying to hide his concern with a smile.

“Let’s go, then,” Liriana said firmly.

“We’ll all go separately,” Gedrel said. “It’ll be safer. Mingle with the people and go unnoticed. Whatever happens, don’t give yourselves up. The square’s in the hands of the Guard and Enforcers.”

Ikai and Liriana exchanged a worried look.

The square was packed with people. Ikai stopped to watch. The Guard surrounded the square and were pushing everyone further inside the huge rectangle it formed. They were coming from the grand main avenue, between the stone statues representing proud warriors and beautiful maidens carrying instruments and amphorae. They were coming from the lower city, from the poorer quadrants, those of the Workmen. The privileged of the Merchant’s Quadrant, being very near, were already in the square. Thousands of people were gathered there. The shining white granite

paving had disappeared under the human tide. *The whole city's here. Sesmok's got something in mind, and I don't like this one little bit.* He moved among the crowd as he scanned the, tall, well-cared-for buildings around the square. *They're not decorated, the way they are when there's a Summons… This isn't something to do with the Enforcers. It's on Sesmok's orders.* On the north side a hundred marble steps ascended from the square to the platform, and here he stopped to look at the great Sacred Monolith above the platform. *The Artifact of the Gods.…* He shivered, and shook his body to get rid of the feeling.

The horns were still calling, and that prolonged, disturbing sound, like a languid droning, faded in Ikai's mind as he stared at the grand object. More than a hundred and twenty feet tall and fifteen across at the base, it was perfectly rectangular. Its dark, pristine surface shone, even at night, with an aura of power: a sinister power. It rose threateningly above the square, above the whole city, a shadow of death. *The instrument of the Gods. Maybe one day we'll find out what it's there for. And maybe we'll be free of it.* Behind the monolith, on the high plain to the north of the city, he saw Regent Sesmok's huge palace with its great golden columns.

But something caught his attention. Something strange, new, out of place. Half-way up the stairs a wooden platform had been placed, and on it stood a huge black cupola which filled it completely. It resembled a sinister dome with no supporting structure. Beside this strange object an Eye-of-the-Gods waited. *What's that? And why have they put it there? I'm beginning to like this less and less…*

The horns stopped at last. He shook his head to make sure the disturbing hum had ended. Three people in rich silks appeared at the base of the great monolith, at the end of the stairs. *Here they come: Regent Sesmok, High Priest Torkem and the Commander of the Hunters. It's beginning. I'd better be on my toes.* He looked around, searching for some friendly face. But around him were strangers, watching what was unfolding with fear in their eyes. Behind the three rulers a dozen Eyes-of-the-Gods appeared, as though they were their bodyguards. But Ikai knew they were there not to protect them personally but to protect the Gods' own interests.

Sesmok took a few steps forward and faced the crowd with his arms outstretched. "Welcome to all of you, my dear people," he thundered.

Ikai recognized him at once. He recognized the icy evil of that heartless man, the lethal danger in him.

“Today you will witness with your own eyes the Power of the Gods,” he announced.

The words were a bad omen. The Power of the Gods was one of death and destruction.

Fearful, the crowd remained silent.

“Today you will learn a valuable lesson. A lesson I wish you to witness so it will be engraved in your hearts, in order that you can announce it to the four winds. I want the message to spread throughout the six Counties. I want every one of the Senoca to take full note of it.”

The silence grew still more ominous. Barely daring to breathe, the crowd listened with a growing fear in their souls.

“And what is that lesson? That is what you will be asking yourselves, my dear people,” he went on with an ironic smile. “A very simple one.” He raised his finger and paused to make sure he had everybody’s attention. Then he cried out: “Whoever rebels against the established order, dies. Dies a horrible death.”

Ikai was beginning to feel deeply uneasy.

Sesmok turned to Torkem. “Go ahead, High Priest,” he said.

The religious leader stepped forward. Ikai remembered how he had almost died at this man’s hands. Torkem was as self-satisfied as ever, with a massive double chin: a repellent face with its flat nose and bald head, with the exception of the lock of white hair which hung from his crown.

“Bring the prisoners,” he ordered.

A dozen or so people began to make their way down the stairs, escorted by Enforcers. Their heads were bowed, their hands tied behind their backs. They were led to the black dome. Ikai narrowed his eyes and tried to identify them. His soul shrank as if it had been squeezed by an icy hand: they were his companions from the Shelter. Martin the miller, the smith, several fishermen.

Torkem bowed. “Whenever you wish, my lord.”

Sesmok stretched out his arms once again. “Witness the Power of the Gods.”

The Eye nearest to the dome touched it with a disc. There came a golden flash, and the dome began to change color. The black faded, turning gradually white, and then became transparent crystal.

The crowd gave a cry of terror. Ikai started back in shock. Inside the dome was a gigantic lion, a monster of unthinkable size. Its eyes were golden. At the sight of the crowd it roared in defiance. Moans and mutterings of fear filled the square. The prisoners stepped back in horror at seeing the beast so close, but were prevented by the Executors.

“Look at this beautiful and terrible creature which the Gods have created. Do you see how magnificent it is? Can you appreciate its lethal strength? Do you understand the Power of the Gods?”

The beast leapt, trying to reach the crowd. Ikai stepped back. But the lion crashed against the translucent barrier of the dome. *It’s a barrier, and it can’t cross it. Thank goodness. If it escaped…*

Sesmok clasped his hands behind his back. “There are some among you who have dared to break the Law of the Gods. And you all know the punishment for such an offense. The Law of the Gods, and under it that of the Regent, must always be respected. What happens to those who break it, High Priest Torkem?”

“The punishment is death, a very painful death. So says the Law.”

Sesmok nodded vehemently. “There are rumors… unfounded rumors… about certain Heroes… who managed to leave the Boundary, who confronted the Gods themselves…. who created a shelter…”

“Utter nonsense!” cried Torkem furiously.

“Exactly. A tissue of lies, to deceive you, my dear people. And these rumors cause harm, a great deal of harm: not to me, but to you, the people, since some of you in your ignorance, naturally credulous, were deceived by those lies. Some, like those you see here” – he indicated the prisoners – “deceived by inventions and chimeras, broke the law.”

“Fools!” Torkem said, and raised his arms to the sky.

“Watch carefully,” Sesmok went on. “This is what awaits whoever dares disobey the will of the Golden.” He gestured to the Eye-of-the-Gods beside the dome, who manipulated the barrier. In a shrill voice, he gave the order to the Executors: “Carry on!”

Before the eyes of the stupefied watchers, the Executors pushed the prisoners inside the dome. The poor wretches, caught by surprise, could not react. Before they could realize what was happening they had crossed the barrier.

“No! By Oxatsi, no!” cried Ikai.

The great beast hurled itself on the prisoners. What ensued filled the hearts of all in the square with shock and horror. The monster tore them to pieces in the blink of an eye. Several of them tried to flee, but found that the barriers would not let them out. Amid cries of despair, every single one of them died. The beast tore them to pieces, then began to devour them.

The watchers tried to move away from the grotesque spectacle, but the Guard formed a line and restrained them. Ikai still in a state of shock, moved to the fore in an attempt to help, but the shield of a Guard hit him hard in the chest and he was forced to step back.

“Back! Nobody’s to leave the square!”

He was about to reveal himself when he saw the chain they were forming. They were held in place, completely surrounded.

“See the Power of the Gods, see their punishment!” Sesmok said haughtily.

Torkem joined in. “Out of their divine goodness, the Golden Gods allow us to live and prosper. But they are our masters, and they watch us. They neither forget nor forgive when we fail to follow their Law, when we allow ourselves to be deceived and turn against them. Their intentions are merciful, but the punishment for disobeying them is merciless.”

“This is what awaits whoever breaks the law of the Golden,” Sesmok said. “Nobody can hide. All must pay, with blood and suffering.”

“We are on this earth to serve our lords,” the High Priest proclaimed, “to comply with their divine will. This is our glorious duty, this is the true path we must follow. What the Gods demand of us we must always fulfill, for their word is law and their ways our duty.”

The horrified spectators were shifting and moaning. The carnage had shocked them so deeply they could not even think any further than wanting to flee.

“I see, my dear people, that the lesson is sinking into your hearts. It gladdens my soul. It’s time now to put an end to the rumors, to the

messages of rebellion among the six Counties. Time to pull out this evil by the root. The one who is leading this revolt must turn himself in. His is the responsibility for what is happening here today. It is because of his insidious message that these poor souls are being sacrificed," Sesmok finished with pretended concern.

"Bring the next batch," Torkem ordered.

Down the stairs came another dozen prisoners. Ikai recognized them: more refugees, peasants, good folk who had done nothing but try to live in peace and freedom. He could hardly breathe. *They're going to be slaughtered! I have to do something! But what?* He tried to compose himself and think, but he was overwhelmed by anxiety.

Sesmok gestured toward the crowd. Rhetorically, he cried: "Whoever leads this group of rebels who are poisoning the hearts of our people with lies must turn himself in here and now. Before everybody."

"The leader of this useless rebellion: let him show himself!" Torkem demanded.

Once again silence took hold of the square. Nobody dared speak, or even make any gesture, for fear of being identified as the hunted person.

"Turn yourself in, Gedrel, and the sacrifices will come to an end. If you do not, I will go on feeding the beast. Its instincts are lethal, and it hungers for humans."

Terror gripped Ikai at the mention of the old resistance leader's name. *How does he know his name? How does he know he's the leader of the rebels?* It might have been Isaz, but he doubted it. *There's another spy among us, one we haven't found out yet. That must be it. But who?*

"Very well, Gedrel, as you wish. The sacrifices will continue. But everyone here must understand that these deaths I so loathe are because of you, and on your conscience they will fall."

"My conscience is perfectly clear," came Gedrel's voice spoke from the crowd.

"Where are you?" Sesmok cried. "Come forward, you coward!"

"Coward? Am I the one sacrificing innocent Senocas to a monster of the Gods? Am I the one hiding behind the Guard and the Enforcers to terrify the people? No, the only coward I can see here is the one who flaunts the position of Regent against his people's will. The only coward and tyrant I

recognize is the one I see at the foot of the monolith of the Gods. The one who enslaves the people and makes them suffer for the greater glory of his masters, the Golden."

"Hold your tongue and show yourself!"

But for some reason nobody moved in the crowd. Gedrel's voice came from the center of the square, but nobody around him gave him away.

"I'm just an old philosopher, a poet, a dreamer. With a dream for my people, a wish in my soul, that one day the Senoca might be free. Free to choose their life and destiny, free from hunger and suffering, free from having to live as slaves only to die at the whim of the Gods or their Enforcers. Free to go back to Mother Sea. What's wrong with that dream? What's wrong with wanting freedom and a prosperous future?"

"How dare you! The destiny of all the Senoca, thousands of innocent lives, the future of our whole race, depends on me. On my shoulders lies the weight of so great a responsibility. Only I stand between our people and the Gods, between the Senoca and their destruction."

"You serve only yourself, your own interests. The people, their wellbeing, mean nothing to you. We're not so foolish as to believe you."

"I'm not going to say it again! Show yourself, or I'll sacrifice them all!"

From among the crowd someone raised an arm. "Here I am! I'm Gedrel!" Sesmok looked in that direction and was about to give the order to the Guard when anther voice and hand rose: "I'm Gedrel!" And this was followed by another, and another, and another… until a hundred hands were raised in the crowd, and before the Regent could react there were a thousand.

Sesmok went red with fury and started to curse. "I'll hang you all for this insolence! All of you!"

"How many more Senoca are you going to kill to ensure your position?" Gedrel said. "How many innocent men, women and children will you sacrifice like cattle to serve the Gods? The terror you spread with these atrocities, with whip and steel, will not silence what everybody already carries in their heart: the message of freedom, the flame of hope. You can go on killing innocents, but the flame will take hold and the rebellion will come. This is only the beginning."

Sesmok turned to Lord Hunter Osvan. “Send all your hunters down there, find him and drag him to me.”

“Right away,” Osvan replied, and left at a run.

“You’ll pay for this with your lives!” – and he gave the order to sacrifice the terrified prisoners. At the order from the Eye-of-the-Gods, the Executors threw them inside the dome. The murderous beast lunged at them, and before the numbed gaze of the whole square, tore them to pieces. The scene was so brutal that all glances fell, like the souls of those Senoca.

“Bring me another dozen!”

From the crowd there now came shouts which never before had a Senoca dared to utter.

“Murderer!”

“Butcher!”

“Traitor!”

“Hangman of the Gods!”

When Sesmok heard this he turned mad with rage. “Ingrates! There won’t be a single prisoner left alive before the day ends! And when I’ve finished with them, I’ll start with you!”

The new batch of prisoners arrived, and Ikai felt a knot in his stomach. Idana, Romen and his mother were among them. *Mother! Mother!* He tried to get closer, but once again the iron formation of the Guard held him back.

“Do you want to end up like them?” one of them said.

“I’m Gedrel. Take me to Sesmok.”

The Guard hesitated. “No, you aren’t him. We know he’s an old man, we have his description. So stay still, or else I’ll skewer you.”

Ikai muttered a curse, and his mind began to shape an alternative plan. At that moment the line of guards divided, and Gedrel appeared. Slowly he crossed the line, went up several steps and stopped.

“I am Gedrel, and I am here.”

“Noooooo!” came Liriana’s piercing lament among the crowd.

“Hold him!” Torkem ordered.

Gedrel’s gaze searched out Liriana. “It has to be done, my child. The flame must take hold.”

Several Hunters surrounded him, and he raised his hands.

“There’s no need for more deaths,” he said. “I surrender. I’m the leader of the rebellion. I admit it openly. I confess I planned a revolt to gain freedom for my people. I confess to having worked clandestinely so that we might all be free, free of these rulers and the Gods they serve.”

“Make him shut up!” Sesmok ordered. “Bring him to me!”

The Hunters hit Gedrel to silence him and dragged him up the stairs to join the other prisoners.

Ikai hurled himself against the line of Guards, but they hit him and he fell.

“On your knees!” Sesmok ordered from above, as if he were a God whom Gedrel and the others must obey.

Gedrel knelt slowly.

“This old man is guilty of treason. He has admitted it openly. I wish you all to witness what happens to those who defy the Law of the Gods. The futility of rebellion, since nobody can oppose the wishes of the Gods. Nobody!”

Gedrel turned his gaze to the crowd in the square. “Don’t forget about me,” he said. “Don’t forget my sacrifice. Keep fighting for freedom. Always. Freedom!”

“Sacrifice him!” Sesmok shouted.

The Executors shoved Gedrel inside the dome. The lion saw him and pounced on him at once.

“For freedom! Rebellion!” the old man cried an instant before the beast slaughtered him.

Ikai rose with moist eyes. Finally he understood what the old leader had said to him, and the reason for that sacrifice. The cause needed a martyr, and now it had one. All would remember that day. They would all remember Gedrel, and his sacrifice.

Among the crowd a cry was heard. “Gedrel!” The cry grew louder. More and more people were shouting: “Gedrel! Gedrel” After a few moments the whole square was chanting, as thousands of throats cried to the sky: “Gedrel! Gedrel! Gedrel!” Thousands of hands rose as the throats of the crowd exalted the fallen leader.

Sesmok lost his head. “Make them shut up! Guard! Shed blood!”

The Guard began to strike those who were shouting, using spears and shields. Suddenly someone cried: “Rebellion!” and fought back against the Guard who was striking him. The man fell dead, pierced by the Guard’s spear. Those near him threw themselves on to the murderer with a cry of *Rebellion* and dragged him down as they hit him. Liriana’s voice rose to the sky. “Rebellion! For Gedrel! Freedom!” and she launched herself at the Guards. She was followed by a hundred men. Chaos took over the square. The Guards fought the crowd, shedding blood. The inflamed mob hurled themselves at them. Cries of fighting and horror filled the square. The Regent’s followers fled to their palaces as the people fought for their freedom and died for it.

Ikai disarmed a Guard and let him be finished off by two men beside him. He grasped spear and shield, went to the stairs and watched the fighting for a moment. Unarmed, they stood no chance against the Guard. Fists are powerless against steel.

When Sesmok saw the revolt he turned to the Eyes behind him. “Send in the Executors,” he told them.

A hundred Executors began to run down the stairs. When they reached the prisoners they continued on their way without stopping, crushing them as they passed. Idana fell to one side, Romen to the other. But Solma was pushed downstairs, and the Executors stepped over her body, treading on it as they went.

“Noooooooooo!” Ikai cried, and ran to her.

When the Executors reached the square they fell on the crowd like a knife slicing through butter, dealing death to right and left. The Guard took up their formation again, and with military discipline hastened to crush the revolt. The cries were more desperate every moment.

When Ikai reached Solma on the stairs she was not moving. Blood was running from the corners of her mouth and her ears. “Mother!” he cried in despair.

Solma opened one eye. “My son…” She spat a mouthful of blood.

He leaned his mother’s head in his lap, barely able to hold back his tears.

“Listen, Ikai… there’s something… I must tell you…”

“Don’t talk now, Mother, save your strength…” He looked for Idana; the apothecary was his only chance. He saw her on her feet, freeing Romen. Two Executors lay dead beside her. The Hunters who had taken Gedrel were fighting a shadow. He could not get a clear idea of what was going on but he knew who it was. *Albana! Thank Heavens!* “Idana will be here soon. Hold on, Mother.”

“No… it’s too late for me… my body can’t take any more… but I have to tell you something very important…”

Ikai nodded, to keep her mind on something until Idana arrived.

“You, and your sister… aren’t like the others…”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“You’re like Albana…”

“Like Albana? I don’t follow. Albana’s a hybrid. She has the blood of the Gods in her veins. Kyra and I are your children, children of Solma and Siul.”

Solma nodded slowly and coughed up blood again. “Your father and I are hybrids too… we were born in the Eternal City, we escaped… the blood of Gods runs through our veins, of powerful Gods…”

He shook his head. He could not make sense of this, or rather accept it. “It can’t be… no… we’re normal.”

“No, you aren’t.” She began to convulse.

He held her close. “Mother, hold on.” He looked up and saw Idana, Albana and Romen running toward them.

“Ikai.”

“Mother, hold on, they’re here.”

“Listen… it’s important… you have very powerful blood… of two royal houses… of their High Kings…”

“I don’t understand, Mother.”

“Remember, my son… it’s very important…” Solma convulsed and coughed blood. A moment later she stiffened.

Idana knelt beside them. “Let me tend to her.”

He moved back, and Idana tried to revive Solma. When several Guards reached them he took spear and shield and faced them, joined by Romen

and Albana. The fight was short and effective. The Guards fell dead on the steps. He turned to Idana.

The apothecary raised her weeping eyes and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Ikai, she’s passed away.”

Something inside Ikai broke, and he felt such an acute pain that his eyes filled with tears.

Sesmok’s voice sounded above the cries and noise of the fray. “You’ll learn your lesson! You’ll learn it through blood!”

“We have to get out of here,” Albana said urgently. “There are more Enforcers coming.”

Ikai tried to move. His mind was telling him to run, but the pain of his loss would not let him react.

“Come on, Ikai!” she urged him.

He came out of his stunned state and they started to go down the stairs, only to find a dozen Executors barring their way.

“We’ll have to go back!” she cried.

They went up a few stairs, but above them were another dozen Executors who came to surround them, their silver spears ready to kill. Below, the fight went on, the cries piercing the sky. The ground of the square was now stained red and the corpses were piling up. Guard, Hunters and Enforcers were crushing the rebellion. The mutineers began to flee down the streets of the city.

Romen was protecting Idana with his own body. Ikai and Albana exchanged a glance. The situation was desperate. He knew that she would use one of her dark arts, and as soon as that happened he was going to take advantage of the surprise and attack. The Executors advanced to form a circle around them.

There was no way out.

Suddenly half a dozen Executors were thrown off to one side, and the circle opened.

What was that? He glanced aside at Albana, but she shook her head.

“Run! Get away!” came a voice from the bottom of the stairs.

Romen and Idana started to run, with Albana close behind. Ikai, who had recognized the voice at once, turned to look for his sister and saw her a

few steps below. With her was a tall, thin man wearing a hooded cloak. Ikai could not see his face, but he had a strange feeling. Very strange.

“Come on, run!” Kyra shouted as the stranger reached out one hand and half a dozen more Executors went flying. The stranger’s hand caught Ikai’s attention. It was golden.

He nodded to his sister and ran as fast as he could. A few steps before the entrance to an alley, he heard Kyra’s piercing cry.

“Mom! Noooooooo!”

He turned and saw that his sister had found Solma’s body. Worried about her reaction, he stopped. But the cloaked stranger, without hesitating, grabbed her by the waist and took her away. A group of Executors chased after them.

They won’t make it! Ikai feared, watching them heading toward the tumult of the square. But suddenly Kyra and her unknown companion vanished amid a strange mist.

“Come on, Ikai!” Albana urged him. “There are more Enforcers on their way!”

He ran.

“Down here, two alleys further on, is the entrance to the sewers,” Albana said as she led them down a narrow street. Then she asked Ikai: “Kyra – did she make it?”

“Yes, but she’s with a God.”

Albana’s eyes opened wide, and she almost stopped dead. “Adamis?”

He was panting from the effort. “I guess so,” he gasped.

“She’ll be okay,” she said to reassure him.

“If he does anything to her, I swear, God or no God, I’ll cut his throat.”

They reached the entrance and took shelter in the evil-smelling underground world.

Chapter 29

“I’ll kill them all! I swear I won’t leave a single one of them alive!” Kyra cried to the moon. She shook her fists, possessed by a bottomless wrath.

The sound of her cries was muffled by the constant thunder of the waterfall which fell and broke on the crystalline lake behind them. Adamis had brought her to this beautiful, hidden corner to try and sooth her, even though he knew it would be practically impossible.

“Try to calm down,” he said softly.

“Calm down? You want me to calm down? They’ve killed my mother! Those swine have killed my mom! How am I supposed to calm down? How?”

“I am deeply sorry…”

“I’ll kill them all! That bastard Sesmok, that grease-ball Torkem, that brute Osvan, the lot of them!”

Seeing that his words had no effect on her, Adamis let her unburden herself of all her rage. Perhaps that way she would calm down a little, even though he knew that the pain in her soul would never go away.

“And when I’m done with them,” she shouted, punching the air like one possessed, “I’ll kill every last one of the Enforcers, until there’s not one of them left in all six Counties!”

Adamis could feel her heartbreak, her infinite pain and her fury. Seeing her like that, in so much agony, left him with a feeling of emptiness he had not felt for a long time: since the death of Rotec, his good friend and protector, in fact. He longed with all his being to help her, to make the pain pass, but he did not know how. He who was a God in the eyes of men, who possessed enormous Power, found himself unable to help this person he cared for so deeply. He would gladly have given part of his Power, of his

lengthy lifespan, to help her, but there was no way he could. And that made him feel impotent, useless.

“Who did my mom ever hurt in all her life? Nobody! Ever! All she did was sacrifice herself and fight for Ikai and me. You wouldn’t find a better woman, a better mother, a better person. Always helping, always working. And those pigs have killed her as if she was just something that got in the way.”

“I am so sorry…”

“So you should be!” She turned furiously to Adamis with eyes red from weeping, her fists white from the strength she was clenching them with.

Adamis did not move, but only bowed his head away from her look of hatred.

“I had nothing to do with it…”

“Yes you did!” she shouted, and began to hammer him on the chest with her fists. “You’re one of them, you’re a damned God!” – and she went on hitting him, her tears now a whole sea of weeping.

He bore it all, accepting the punishment, both physical and verbal, as if it were a penance he felt obliged to make.

“I am no longer like them…” he whispered tenderly.

“You’re all ruthless monsters! Our lives are nothing to you! We’re nothing more than ants who work till they die just to uphold your glorious civilization and that you crush when you feel like it! Just as you crushed my mother!”

“You know I am not that. You changed me.”

At his words, she stopped hitting him. She leaned against him, head back, gazing up at his face.

“I changed you?”

“You opened my eyes. You made me see that all life is valuable, that the slaves have a right to their freedom, to live a full life, in freedom and happiness. That it is not only the Gods who have that right. You made me see how mistaken and ruthless our way of understanding life is. We have no right to enslave anybody for our own glory, no right to consider the world and all that is in it our own, simply because we have the Power to make it

so. All this you have shown me, and now you have turned my world upside down."

"Do you mean that, or are you just saying it to make me calm down?"

"I would never lie to you, Kyra of the Senoca. I am telling you the truth. Look into my eyes and you will see."

Kyra reached out to pull off the hood which covered his head. Gazing at his beautiful golden face, she lost herself in his blue-gray eyes. Her tears stopped flowing, her pain and rage grew less. She put her hands to his cheeks and felt his own on her waist.

"I believe you," she said at last. "Your eyes don't lie."

"I could never lie to you."

"Why did you come for me? Why did you save me?"

"You were in danger."

"Have you been finding out about me?"

"Yes. That is how I knew your life was at risk."

"You might have sent someone… even the Enforcers. Why did you come in person?"

"I wanted to. I needed to see you… to know that you were well."

"Why? You're the God-Prince of one of the most powerful houses, you're one of the most powerful Gods. What do you want with a poor slave like me?"

"I do not know, Kyra… I just know I needed to see you, be with you…"

Kyra felt her pain slip to some less immediate level, and another very powerful feeling started in her stomach and rose to her heart. She felt a surge of uncontrollable nervousness. A strange warmth enveloped her, a growing unrest, an overflowing desire…

"You're making me confused, Adamis… I wasn't expecting to see you, and now that we're together… I want to hate you, for what you are, for what you represent, but I can't. Something in me won't let me hate you. I ought to fight against you. You're my enemy."

"I am not your enemy, and you know that."

"I do, and that's what puzzles me. Why can't I hate you? Why do I feel so strange when I'm with you?"

“I do not know. All I know is that I want to be with you, as we are now, sharing this moment I wish would never end. Your hands on me, my hands on you. Our bodies together, our souls joined.”

When she heard those words Kyra felt a need to embrace him with her whole being, to kiss him, and she did not think twice: she kissed Adamis with such intense passion that flames almost burst from her embrace. God and slave kissed, and for a single moment everything around them was frozen: the roar of the waterfall behind them vanished, the reflection of the moon on the surface of the lake solidified.

“I don’t know what came over me. I don’t understand why I reacted like that.”

“Neither do I,” said Adamis as he put his arms around her waist gently but firmly, “but I do not want it to end.”

“I’m a slave, a Senoca, and you’re a God. This is impossible….”

“It is madness, I cannot deny it. But if we are to change the world we live in, perhaps we should begin by changing ourselves.”

They looked into one another’s eyes and were unable to resist their mutual attraction. They kissed again, with greater passion, and stayed clasped in one another’s arms, unable to let go. They sat down on the lakeshore, watching the moon and stars which seemed to be smiling upon them. Adamis held Kyra protectively, giving her warmth and support. It was so pleasurable that for a moment all the pain in her heart vanished. And at that same moment she gave in, falling asleep in his tender embrace.

She was awoken by the morning twittering of birds. When she opened her eyes she was surprised to find herself behind the waterfall, in a cave with moss-covered walls and an opening above through which light was streaming in. Adamis was looking out through the ceaseless curtain of water, watching a deer which had come to the lake to drink and was hiding behind an oak at the edge. He turned and smiled at her with those thin, perfectly outlined lips of his. In his smile was peace and joy. The landscape was so beautiful, he was so beautiful, and to Kyra the moment was like something out of a summer’s dream.

“How did you find me?”

He showed her a crystalline disc with a huge golden pip in the middle. “I believe this is yours.”

“The disc you gave me! The Enforcers took it away when they captured me.”

“I could not follow your essence, but I could follow that of the disc. It is imbued with my power. I can feel it and track it, for it is a part of me. When I rescued you I recovered it from the Eye-of-the-God keeping it. Without it, I could never have found you.”

“I haven’t learnt to use it… Albana tried to teach me, but I didn’t like the implications.”

“If you can use it, it means you are a hybrid. Is that what you disliked?”

“For a God, you’re pretty sharp,” she said.

He smiled and gave a slight bow. “Notaplo’s experiment already proved that. It is just that you have not wished to accept the fact.”

“It’s not something I wanted. Or something I like.”

“I know, and I understand. But it is important for you to accept who and what you are. Deeply important, in fact. And now more so than ever.”

“Are you an Erudite, besides being a Prince?”

Adamis laughed. “No, no, I have Notaplo for that. But it is important that everyone should accept who they are. If we are lost we might err in our choices. I think you should think again about learning to use the Power. You are going to need it in the turbulent times at hand, and I would feel more at ease if you did.”

Kyra threw herself on him and kissed his cheek.

“What is that for?”

“For caring about me.”

He smiled.

“I have to tell you something about myself, about my parents…”

“I am listening.”

She told him what had happened with Oskas and what her mother had revealed to her. As she spoke, his face turned more serious. When she had finished there was a silence. The Prince seemed to be reflecting upon the implications.

“It would be best if for the moment what you have just told me stays between the two of us.”

She made a face. “It’s not something I plan to tell the world about.”

“I know, but it could have serious repercussions.”

“And those would be…?”

“Let us make a deal. Let me teach you how to use the Power, and when we are done I will tell you.”

“I don’t like it. Why don’t you just tell me and get it over with?”

“I want you to learn to use your Power. It is important, believe me. And it will be even more so in the near future.”

“All right then, you win. But I want you to tell me every last detail.”

“Very well.”

Kyra took her knife and made a cut in the palm of her hand.

“*Very well* isn’t good enough. A deal has to be sealed with blood.” She offered him her hand.

“Do you seriously think I am going to inflict a wound on myself for this? My word, as a Prince, is sacred.”

“How petulant and vain you Gods are! Blood, or there’s no deal.”

Adamis shook his head, and there was pure disapproval on his face. But he made the cut and gave his hand to her.

“You see? It wasn’t so terrible, your Highness,” she said with an irreverent smile. She pressed their hands together, then said: “It’s a deal.”

Towards sunset, after getting food in the nearby woods and resting to get their strength back after what they had been through, Kyra felt a little more herself, although the pain she felt at the loss of her mother did not grow less. She felt as if her heart had been pierced by a poisoned spear, and every now and then her eyes would fill with tears and her hand go to her bosom.

Adamis noticed this, and took her hand.

“Let us walk a little along the shore. It will do you good.”

They walked in silence, hand in hand, their souls ever closer. At last she stopped and looked into his eyes.

“Thank you, it did help. I feel better. It’s time now to learn how to use the Power. Teach me.”

“We could leave it till tomorrow…”

“I can’t go on putting it off forever. Ikai must be worried. The sooner I get back, the better.”

“Oh, I see your warrior soul is stirring again.”

“There’s no use hiding. You have to face the enemy and fight, whatever it costs. I’ve already sacrificed my mother and my friends. Now I have to fight. It’s time to face the enemy and defeat it.”

Adamis nodded. “You have the heart of a Warrior Goddess.”

“That’s why I need you to teach me how to fight, so I can become one.”

“Very well. I will grant your wish.”

He showed her the disc he had presented to her. “Before you learn to use it, you must accept who you really are. The sooner you do so, the sooner you will be able to use the Power and be able to fight using it.”

“Go ahead. I won’t resist.”

“You have to understand you are an exceptional anomaly: a Hybrid with Power. Notaplo told you, hybrids do exist and we cannot deny the evidence of what happens in some of the Houses. The harems, the weakness of some Lords for slave women, is undeniable.” He bent his head. “It is shameful and inexcusable, and it ought to be banned, but it is a fact.”

Kyra clenched her fists. “If I had a knife and they let me into one of those harems, I can assure you that before they knew what was happening, more than one God would come out of there as a eunuch.”

Adamis’s eyes widened in surprise. He shook his head, and laughed.

“You have to understand that you are special. The blood of the Gods runs through your veins, mixed with that of the Senoca. But most importantly: you have Power, something a hybrid very rarely has. Those who have been found have been recruited by the Houses, Princes and High Kings. They are used as spies or assassins. This is what happened with your friend Albana and her master Oskas. He serves Asu, and is extremely dangerous.”

“I see.”

“Open your hand.”

When she did so, Adamis placed the disc on her palm. The disc let out a golden flash and activated itself. It rose and hung suspended in the air above her hand, vibrating with a strange hum.

“I see you have already completed the Symbiosis.”

“Yes, the disc drank my blood. Albana did it. It was very strange. I felt… weird…”

“In that case you have already become one, the Power in this disc and you. Close your eyes, focus on the pip at its center. It is a source of Power, and as such, you will be able to use it. You must see it in your mind as a creature you can rule.”

“Rule?”

“It is at your disposal. Its Power belongs to you now. You can use it to interact and manipulate the elements of Nature.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow you…”

“As time goes by you will understand. For the moment, concentrate on the pip. Can you see it in your mind?”

“No. I can’t see anything but darkness. Albana made me give an order to the disc and it worked.”

“Yes, I imagine she did it to show you that you can use it. But that is not the way to do it. That way you do not have control over the Power and there might be an accident. You have to learn to rule it. That is the crucial point.”

“I’m beginning to make something out… it’s a golden dot, but blurred… it’s small, as if it was a long way away…”

“Do not open your eyes, and keep focusing on the pip. You must see it in your mind with absolute clarity, as if it were daylight. When you do that, the disc will give out a golden spark.”

Kyra went on with the exercise. After a while, seeing she was making no progress, she opened her eyes.

“I just can’t do it!”

Adamis looked at the sky and murmured: “You have many good qualities, Kyra of the Senoca, but patience is not one of them.”

“What use is patience, it’s just a waste of time!”

“It is useful for learning, for improvement, for mastering the arts.”

“Don’t you come the know-all with me unless you want me to give you what for!”

Surprised by her reply, Adamis laughed. Then he turned serious once again.

“We have a hard task ahead of us and not much time. You must learn, and you need to do it fast. I need you to make an effort, with all your soul. What I need to teach you takes years to learn. Albana studied for years in order to master her Power and turn it into skills. We do not have that luxury. I will not be able to teach you more than the basic control of Power, without going on to transform it into skills. But I need all your attention, all your effort.”

Kyra made a face.

“You don’t look pretty when you go all serious and preachy.”

Adamis’s eyes widened in surprise. “You are simply impossible!”

“Yeah, I know. Now smile a little. I do understand how important it is. I’ll try again, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“You will achieve it. I have faith in you. Sit with your legs crossed, looking toward the lake. Its serenity will help you focus. Put the hand holding the disc to your chest, like this.” He demonstrated.

Kyra did the same, so they were sitting side by side.

“When you do it, it looks so simple and natural.”

“That is because I am a God and not a pigheaded slave girl. Now focus!”

“Just let me…!”

But he had already risen and was looking at her with a triumphant smile.

She tried for hours, but without success. Her curses scared off the birds, which flew away. Night came, and Adamis insisted that she keep on practicing. He disappeared in search of food, then when he came back he made a fire in front of the waterfall and proceeded to roast a couple of rabbits.

Kyra turned round. “That smells delicious.”

“Keep on trying…”

“But I’m starving!”

“No dinner until you manage it.”

“It’s not fair! I’ve been making a fool of myself here for hours. My head hurts.”

“Go on. I shall let you know when you can stop.”

“You’re… an unbearable… God!”

“Carry on…”

In the end he had to give in and let her gulp down the meal hungrily. Afterwards, disheartened by the failure, they went inside the cave to rest. They lay down beside each other in silence.

“What if I can’t do it? What if I’m just not up to it?” she asked in frustration.

He put his chest against her back and held her close.

“You will. I know you will.”

“Why do you have such trust in me?”

“Because I see in you what you cannot yet see for yourself,” he said, and held her closer. “Trust me.”

Exhausted from all the excitement of the day, she fell asleep in his protective embrace.

The following day was long, demanding and deeply frustrating for Kyra. She could not manage it. Adamis had tried to teach her to breathe and relax, to bring her concentration to bear, but nothing had worked. Her fiery temperament was getting in the way.

At nightfall she went up to him by the fireside and threw him the disc.

“I don’t want it! There’s no way! I’m fed up!”

He picked up the disc and laid it down beside him.

“Sit down and we will eat. You will feel better.”

They dined in silence. She felt totally frustrated, filled with rage. When they lay down to sleep Adamis held her again, and in the warmth of his body she grew calmer.

“Sleep, rest…” he whispered, and she gave way.

On the third day she kept trying with renewed spirit, refusing to give in. When night fell Adamis made a fire and began to roast a young deer. Kyra breathed in deeply three times, as he had shown her to. Her body was relaxed, in position, in balance. She placed her left hand underneath her right. She could feel the strange humming of the Disc as it hovered over her hands at chest level. She relaxed even more. There was nothing but the disc and herself. The universe around her vanished: lake, waterfall, fire, Adamis, everything. *There's only me and the disc. It's right there in front of my chest, I just have to grasp it, see it in my mind.* Rage began to rise from the pit of her stomach, frustrated rage. *If I let it grow, it'll consume me and I'll fail again. I have to calm down, I have to put out this rage.* And at that moment she realized what was really happening. It was not that she was unable to visualize the pip, rather her own frustration at being unable to get immediate results was sabotaging her efforts. *I'm tripping myself up. What a fool I am! It's my own rage that's defeating me.* She took three deep breaths and focused on calming down. It took her some time, but finally she reached a more harmonious state. She focused on the pip once more and made it out in the distance, but instead of feeling frustrated, she took courage. *It's right there, I just have to bring it towards me, towards my mind. I'll manage, slowly, calmly, there's no hurry. There's only me and the pip.* And for the first time the rage failed to make an appearance. Little by little the pip became clearer, came closer, growing larger, until in her mind it appeared completely transparent.

And then came the flash. It bathed her completely. She felt strange, as if the energy had entered her body. She opened her eyes and found something wonderful: she could still see the pip in her mind. Even with her eyes open, even looking at the lake, it was there. She closed her eyes and saw it in full detail. She opened them and it was still there.

"I can see it, it's in my mind!"

Adamis hugged her. "You did it. I knew you would!"

Kyra was so pleased she cried out to the moon. Then she kissed Adamis with all her being.

"Tomorrow I will teach you to use the Power."

The fourth day, she was ready even before the sun made its appearance.

“I see you are changing your mind about this.”

“Considering all it’s cost me? Of course I want to learn!”

“All right, then,” he said, and smiled. “Now listen carefully.”

She nodded. Her ruby eyes were fixed on his mouth.

“The Power feeds on the five elements of Nature, and is more prone to interact with them. Each one of us has a greater affinity to one of the five elements. In my case Ether: the spirit, the Being. Others have an affinity to Fire, Water, Earth or Air.”

“Can you only use the Power of Ether? Not that of the other elements?”

“Not so. Listen carefully to the five principles which rule the Power.”

Kyra gave him all her attention. She knew this was important, and she wanted to learn everything.

“First Rule: Power consumes life. Every time a God uses the Power in any form, for any use, his life-span decreases.”

She nodded. She already knew this from her stay in the Eternal City. She also knew that was not the case for Hybrids.

“Second Rule: The Power is finite. Every being is born with a source of Power which is finite. The size of that source is different for everyone. This Power is regenerated once used, but the body needs time for that. Wise Nature controls it in this way so that nobody should be omnipotent.”

Kyra looked at him in puzzlement.

“Completely Powerful.”

She nodded in understanding.

“Third Rule: Power has an affinity to one element. Every being inherits from his ancestors a keener affinity to one of the elements. Power runs in the blood. One can inherit up to five elements, but one will always prevail over the others. The power of the inheritance is what establishes the prevalence.”

“Fourth Rule: Power is not limited to one element. Using the Power of the other elements is possible, but inefficient.”

“Inefficient?”

“I might use another element – water for example – but as I have no affinity for that element, it is limited for me: the strength of the power exerted is much less and its use far more costly. And this leads us back to Rule number One.”

Kyra looked at him, thoughtful, puzzling over the four rules.

“I think I understand it. So you can use the ether up to a point, then you have to regenerate your Power. Each time you use it you’re consuming moments of your life. And although you can use the power of water, then your life would be consumed faster and you couldn’t even do great things the way you can with ether.”

Adamis was surprised. His fine eyebrows arched and his eyes shone with pride.

“You are definitely intelligent.”

“I may not look it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not,” she said, making a face and sticking out her tongue at him. He roared with laughter.

“And the Fifth Rule?”

“This is the most important one, though many forget it. Fifth Rule: Power serves Mother Nature. Every life dies at the end of its natural cycle and another begins.”

“Interesting. Makes you think…”

“Right then. Now that you know the laws which rule the Power, we had better continue. Unfortunately I cannot teach you to use your Power, not even to find out what element you have an affinity to. That would take too much time, since you know nothing of your family tree. All my ancestors belong to my House. Therefore my Power is pure and strong in Ether. In your case we would have to find out by trial and error, and it would be a long and costly process. Unless you want to leave the fighting and come with me…”

Kyra considered her answer.

“You know I can’t… I’d love to lose myself with you and have you teach me all these things… and many more… but my people need me. I can’t leave them now that the rebellion has begun. I have to stay and help.”

“Very well,” he said with a friendly smile. “I had to try.”

“Someday, I promise.”

Adamis nodded. “I will hold you to your word.”

Kyra kissed the tip of his nose.

“Thank you for understanding.”

He took her hand and led her to the lake.

“Let us continue. The disc contains a pip that contains my Power, the Power of Ether. Therefore you will be able to use that element, albeit in its roughest and most basic form. There are two skills I need to show you which will be very useful to you. If you master them, I will be satisfied. The rest will have to wait for a better time.”

“Very well, I’m ready. I hope I don’t disappoint you.”

“Every moment by your side fills me with joy. Whether you manage it or not, you will not disappoint me. Your noble, courageous heart will never disappoint me.”

“Keep on showing me. You’re making me blush.”

“As you wish. The Power of Ether entails reaching the spirit, the essence of things, and manipulating them. It is easier to manage it with people, animals, plants: any living thing in Nature. With inanimate objects, like those rocks, it is more difficult, although it can be done. Let me show you.” Adamis twisted his arm and there was a flash. Thirty or so rocks were hurled off the shore across the lake at tremendous speed.

“Wow! If they hit anybody…”

“Watch.” He did the same thing again, but this time each rock hit a nearby tree.

“Unbelievable!”

“The Power can be used as a weapon, even though in itself it is not one. The only thing I have done is throw a few rocks. How I did it is what matters.”

“Right.”

“But let us start with something simpler. The first thing is to know yourself, your Power, and how to use it. Activate the disc in your hand and close your eyes.”

Kyra obeyed immediately.

“Very good. Can you see it in your mind?”

She nodded.

“Good. Now you must search for your essence, your spirit. You must search within yourself.”

“How will I recognize it?”

“When you find it you will become aware of a silver aura around your person. Once you see that, you will be able to interact with your body through the Power of the disc.”

“Very well, I’ll try.” She concentrated, and with her whole being tried to perceive her aura.

“Gently. It is not a simple task, it will take you some time. You need to isolate yourself from the rest of the world and search within, imagining that aura, until you find it.”

Kyra tried all day, until she collapsed in exhaustion, but without success. Even so, she did not give up, and the following day she tried again. The same thing happened. But she did not allow her failure to turn into rage. She kept trying, with all her heart, putting out any spark of rage and starting over. And on the evening of the third day, she managed to glimpse something.

“Adamis! Come here! I can see something!”

“What can you see?”

“A silhouette, quite faint… an outline in white light, a long way away …”

“Good. You are nearly there. You need to draw it toward you. Pull as if it were an object you wanted to attract.”

She followed his instructions, and a moment later a white light ran through her whole body.

“I can see it! I can see my aura! I did it!”

“Wonderful. You did well. Now listen carefully, because what we are going to do now is dangerous. You will need to focus really hard.”

“All right, I’m ready.”

“Now, concentrating on your aura, I want you to command the disc to slowly, very slowly, raise you two hand-spans above the ground. Two hand-spans. The measure is fundamental. Slowly, two hand-spans. I am here with you, do not worry.”

“Right, here I go. By Oxatsi!”

Kyra transmitted the order to the disc in her mind, concentrating on its silhouette. Suddenly she felt a tingle and a sensation of emptiness.

“Do I open my eyes?”

“No, or else you will lose your concentration on your aura. Keep your eyes closed. Now command the disc to move you two steps back. Slowly. Remember: measure is fundamental.”

Kyra nodded. Concentrating with all her strength, she gave the order. Once again she felt the tingle and the sensation of emptiness.

“Very good,” Adamis said, but his voice sounded distant. “Now open your eyes, but do not lose your concentration.”

She opened her eyes, and the shock she received suddenly was as though a pail of icy water had been thrown in her face. She was six feet above the center of the lake.

“By Girlai! What am I doing here?” The surprise made her lose her concentration, and with a scream she fell into the water.

Adamis laughed without stopping as she swam to the shore.

“I don’t see what’s funny about it. I’m soaked! And boy, was I scared!”

He could not stop laughing.

“You’re an idiot!”

“I did tell you that the measure was essential, but knowing you I am not surprised at what just happened.”

Kyra aimed a kick at him. “You conceited God,” she protested, and proceeded to dry herself.

At night, beside the fire, he held her tight and her anger vanished, carried away in the breeze by his warm presence.

“One thing I can tell you: your Power is great. Most never rise more than two finger-breadths the first time.”

“Is that true, or are you just telling me a lie to make me feel better?”

“I am telling you the truth.

“Well then, I’m very glad. What will you teach me tomorrow?”

“You will have to wait and see.”

“All you Gods are so obnoxious!”

“Let us rest, my temperamental little vixen.”

“Idiot.”

They held each other and rested, their joyful hearts overflowing.

At dawn Adamis took her down to the lake once again.

“Today you will repeat the exercise, but this time it will be me that you will take to the center of the lake.”

“But how am I going to do that?”

“You will search for my aura, focus on it and move me.”

“I don’t think I can…”

“You will. Have faith in yourself.”

“But you’re a God…”

“I am a creature like any other, a child of Mother Nature, and that is what you must visualize in your mind.”

“All right then. I’ll try.”

And to her great surprise, she succeeded in seeing his aura almost at once. It was so powerful, so brilliant, that it scorched the senses. For a moment she thought it was burning her mind.

She closed her eyes tightly, focusing even more, and gave the order to the disc. She felt the tingling, but not the sense of void, since it was not herself she was lifting.

“Open your eyes.”

When she did so, she found him hovering suspended above the lake.

“Are you doing it yourself, to make me feel better?”

“Check for yourself. Move me. In whatever direction you want. I will not know which.”

She concentrated, without closing her eyes this time, and commanded: “*Up, the height of two bodies, slowly*.” The Disc flashed, and Adamis rose the same distance.

“Yes! It’s me! I did it! I can’t believe it!” She was jumping up and down, shouting joyfully. The spell broke, and he began to fall towards the water. An instant before he hit the surface his body gave a flash and disappeared in a mist, then reappeared beside her.

“Happy?”

“Yes! Absolutely!” she replied, and flung herself into his arms.

“Tomorrow I will teach you how to protect yourself, how to create a shield.”

“And the next day?”

“And the next day it will be time to leave. We have been here for many days. They will be searching for you, risking their lives to find you.”

“Yes. It’s time to go back to Ikai and all the others. Time to begin the rebellion. We must unite the people, rise up, and bring down the Regent and the Enforcers.”

Adamis was silent, but there was concern on his golden face.

“Tell me, will you come with me? Will you fight beside me?”

“Is there any way I can dissuade you from going to fight?”

“Well, can you make the Regent, the Guard, the Hunters, the Eyes, the Executors and the Oppressors all disappear? Can you bring down the Boundary? Can you give us the freedom we crave and which is our right? Can you free the Senoca? If you can, there won’t be any fighting.”

He was silent for a moment.

“No, I cannot. Even if I wanted to, it would be impossible for me. You must understand that the Boundary of the Senoca does not belong to my House but to the House of the Fifth Ring, the Lord of Water. He will never grant you freedom. He will never allow any other House to interfere in his domains.”

“His domains? Is that what we are?”

“You know what I meant… The High King of the Fifth Ring will never agree to my request to free you. And I cannot impose it on him, not without declaring a war between the Houses which my father would not allow. No, I cannot grant you freedom, no matter how much I wish I could.”

“In that case, I’ll fight. Fight until we’re free. For my mother, for Yosane, for Urda, for all those who’ve fallen, for the hundreds who die every day, for the thousands who suffer from sunup to sundown simply because they were born Senoca.”

Adamis sighed. “Nothing I say will make you change your mind, will it?”

“No, and you know that. It’s the right thing. That’s why you’ve taught me how to use the Power, so I can defend myself. I’m not very clever, but I can see your concern for me in your eyes, and I know the reason that made you do it.”

“I do not want to lose you.”

“Then fight beside me.”

“It is suicide, Kyra. You face the Guard and the Enforcers. You have no army. You are farmers, you do not know how to fight. You cannot win.”

“But there are many of us, and we’re guided by our hearts and the rightness of our cause.”

“The heart and the rightness of a cause are helpless against a well-armed, organized army. And so are numbers. The Executors in formation, or the Guard itself, will destroy the farmers. What you intend is madness.”

“You can fight beside me. You are very powerful, a God. That would give us a chance.”

“You ask me to go against everything I am, everything I know, everything I have been all my life.”

“I ask you to let yourself be guided by your heart, not your position.”

“If I do that, Kyra, I doom myself. My people would sentence me to death. My own father would search me out with his army of Gods and hand me over to the High Kings, to be executed for the dishonor I would have caused my House.”

“Forgive me, I said it without thinking… I didn’t know…”

Adamis took both her hands in his own.

“You have to understand that by stepping in, by rescuing you, and even more by simply being here with you now, I am condemning myself. My father implicitly forbade me to. If he finds out what I have done, he will fly into a rage and my punishment will be exemplary. He will bury me alive for five hundred years. He will allow nobody to question his authority, least of all me, his son and heir.”

“I… I’m sorry… I didn’t realize I was dragging you into this situation.”

“Shhh… you have not dragged me into anything. I am the master of my own decisions and actions.”

“But you’re risking so much for me…”

“I would risk my life for you without a thought. The longer I spend with you the more powerful grow the feelings of my heart and the more I want to be with you and protect you from all evil.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to stay. I don’t want you to be condemned by your father and your people. Go back to them, so they don’t discover what you’ve done. What has to happen here will happen, and it’s inevitable now. You don’t need to interfere.”

“That decision is mine, and mine alone.”

Kyra feared for him, for both of them, but there was no way they could stop now. What would be, would be. If they both perished it would be by the will of their own hearts.

They kissed with the intensity of a thousand suns, and their souls were joined forever.

Chapter 30

Liriana was weeping at the foot of the majestic oak. Night was falling, with the moon beginning to peek out amid dark and threatening clouds. She was trying to hold back the tears, but was unable to. Ikai watched her, feeling her pain. He had lost his mother, she had lost Gedrel, who in her heart was a father. His eyes watered and a painful knot in his throat stopped him from swallowing. He had spent days of pain and tears, days brooding over what had happened, over inevitability, his future, and the fate of the Senoca. Meanwhile he tried to bear the unbearable pain of losing his mother, of having been unable to protect her.

“This place… this ancient oak tree… was his favorite,” Liriana said without taking her eyes off the tree.

“I didn’t know that. I would’ve liked to spend more time with him. He was a good man, and a wise leader.”

“He told me this place, this powerful oak, represents our spirit, the soul of our people. He assured me that as long as it stands there’ll be hope for the Senoca.”

“Is that why you brought us here?”

“That, and because this is where we’re going to meet.”

“Meet? Who d’you mean? What for?”

“You’ll find out tonight. It’ll be a truly important meeting, for all of us, for all the Senoca people.”

“I thought you trusted me, that you weren’t hiding any secrets from me.”

Liriana turned, and her turquoise eyes bored into his own. “I trust you. I always have, and you know that. But tonight you’ll have to make a decision you’ve been avoiding for a long time.”

As he gazed at her face, Ikai felt himself shiver. No matter how hard he might deny it, she stirred unexpected feelings in him. Feelings he should

not be having. He wondered whether it was the same with her. Probably not.

“If I have to make a decision, then I will. I just want you to know you can always trust me.”

She smiled faintly. “I know, Ikai. I’ve always known, ever since our paths crossed. I know you well, very well.” She looked away.

Maruk, who had been preparing the camp fire where they were to gather, brought across a water-skin and offered it to Liriana. “Are you all right, Captain?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Don’t you worry.”

“I always worry about you, even though I know you’re strong and you’ll get over it. I miss him too. Gedrel was a great man. A visionary.”

“We’ll all miss him.”

Maruk offered the water to Ikai, with a sideways glance. There was something in that look, a silent warning. He understood.

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

Liriana stroked Maruk’s cheek. “How’s the camp coming along?”

“It’s ready, as you ordered. It’s in the deepest part of the oak grove, on the other side of the Boundary that divides it. I’ve manipulated the Rings of everyone who escaped with us. It’s taken me several days, but now they can all cross over.”

“That’s wonderful. Thanks. You’re in charge of making sure the camp is up and secure. It’ll be our base for operations from now on.”

“Right. I love it when you get all military on me.”

“Will you please take this seriously? Our lives are at stake!”

“I know. Isn’t it exciting?” Maruk seized her by the waist to kiss her.

She moved her head aside. “You’re impossible. Go to the camp and get on with things. Don’t make me whip you.” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she realized how it had sounded. Maruk grinned from ear to ear and eyed her roguishly. “Don’t you dare say anything! Off you go to the camp!”

Maruk left, laughing.

“And don’t you say anything either.” She jabbed her finger at Ikai, her face as red as a ripe tomato.

“Not a word.” He smiled and waved his hand reassuringly.

The sound of running footsteps made them turn to the south. It was Karm and Honus, who had been on watch duty. Something was up.

“Someone’s coming, from the south,” they called out.

“Take up your positions,” Liriana said. They took shelter behind two sturdy oaks at once and readied their bows.

“Romen!” Liriana called out, and he came out of the oak grove behind her. “Cover us from the big oak.”

Ikai took a step forward, but she stopped him. “I’ll take care of them. You hide and cover me.”

“Right, but be careful.”

“I will,” she said, and went to stand behind the fire.

It was not long before the three men appeared in the clearing in front of the great oak and stopped a few steps from the fire. The man leading them was a giant, bigger even than Honus, who carried a huge axe. The other two also carried axes. Ikai tensed the string of his bow.

Liriana’s stern face relaxed. She raised her hand to greet the new arrivals with a broad smile. “Welcome! Rutus, I’m so glad to see you. You’ve been quick. The Third County’s a long way from here.”

“You called me, you said it was urgent and important, and here I am,” said the giant with the black beard. He hugged her, lifting her off her feet.

She laughed.

Rutus let her fall, and she hastened to greet his two cousins Usom and Turos.

“How’s your leg, Usom?” she asked, recalling the wound he had received during the attack on the convoy.

“Fine. It’s healed, but now I walk with a limp.”

“Better that than lose it,” Turos said, and gave him a wink.

“I’m so glad to see the three of you. I had no idea whether you’d been caught after our attack.”

“It’s been a hard time, but we survived,” the giant said, and added firmly: “We’re keen to get back into action again.”

“Very soon, Rutus, very soon.”

“We’re with you.”

Liriana turned. “You can come out. They’re friends. We were expecting them.” Ikai lowered his bow and came out, with the others behind him. Liriana introduced Ikai, Karm and Honus to the woodsmen, who nodded in return.

“Thank you for coming, Rutus,” said Liriana. “Take a seat by the fire.” She gestured to one of the seven stumps which had been placed around it. “I’ll bring you something to eat and drink while we wait for the others. You must be tired after the journey.”

“Thank you,” said Rutus. “I’m so hungry I could eat a whole boar all by myself.”

Looking at him, Ikai had no doubt that he was perfectly capable of doing exactly that. While Liriana was informed about the situation in the Third County, Idana appeared between the trees with food.

A few at a time, the remaining guests at the crucial meeting arrived. Mitas the miner, broad-shouldered and black-faced, came leading the group from the Fourth County. After them came Ganat, tall and thin, leading the cattlemen of the First County, with the smell that typified them. Then it was the turn of Camptos, who arrived with three farmers from the Sixth County. Ikai recognized him, and they greeted each other. Then followed Costan with his group from the Fifth County, also farmers. Last to arrive was Pasmal of the Second County, with several shepherds and goatherds.

In lieu of Gedrel, Liriana greeted them all fondly. These men were brave souls who were giving everything to the cause. Greetings became widespread, as though this were a large family reunion. Idana brought food and drink for everyone. Each leader sat on one of the six stumps, with his companions behind him. The seventh, the one which represented the capital and which the old leader had occupied, remained empty.

“You all know what happened in Osaen, what happened to Gedrel.”

They raised their voices in response: “A brave and exceptional, man.” “An incomparable leader.” “A wise man, a visionary, the soul of the people.”

Camptos straightened and said: “He was a Master, who gave everything, even his life, for us, for his people.”

The reply was unanimous: “The soul of the rebellion!”

Liriana nodded. “Let’s raise our glasses to the moon and toast Master Gedrel, who united us in order to lead the people to freedom!”

Everybody raised their glasses and a single shout was heard: “For Gedrel!”

Liriana sat down on the seventh stump. “I sit here to represent the capital, not as Gedrel’s successor.”

They all stared at her, and Rutus said: “You must lead us now that the master’s gone.”

“That’s something which must be decided here tonight.”

Rutus crossed his hands over his huge chest. “I know you. I’ve fought beside you and we’ve shed enemy blood. I trust you. I won’t follow anybody else.”

“Thank you, Rutus, but Gedrel’s plans were different, and I intend to honor his wishes.”

“Very well then. Explain.”

Liriana turned to them all. “What happened in the capital has caused the flame to take hold in the people’s hearts. What Gedrel predicted would happen has happened. We passed on the message, we gave hope to the people, and now that hope fills the hearts of the Senoca. It’s time to finish what we started so long ago, what we all wish for. It’s time to take the final step toward gaining our freedom. This is the moment for the Rebellion. It’s a unique opportunity, and we must take it. Gedrel sacrificed himself to give us this chance, and we can’t let it pass. This is the moment.”

“Do you want us to rise up in arms? Rutus asked, his axe clasped in his hands.

“I want us to overthrow Regent Sesmok. To expel the Enforcers.”

A worried silence followed her words.

“That’s why I’ve called you here tonight. This meeting will decide the future of the Senoca. The seven of us will decide our people’s future. But it must be a unanimous decision. I won’t risk everyone’s lives if I don’t have your total, unconditional support.”

Again there followed a heavy silence.

Rutus was the first to speak. “Because of our attack, the Third County suffered the consequences. The Guard and the Enforcers punished the people. Many perished. Innocent woodsmen, poor farmers who had nothing to do with it. Once blood’s spilt, you can’t stop what happens next. I’ve spilt enemy blood… and the blood of my own people too. There’s no way back. I’ll keep going. You can count on my support and my axe. The Third County’s with you.”

Mitas the miner cleared his throat. “You’re asking a lot of us. It’s one thing to spread the message among our people, or carry out small acts of sabotage, or steal provisions. Overthrowing Sesmok is something very different. We’ll be fighting the whole Guard and the Enforcers…”

“We don’t have an army like them,” said Ganat the cattleman. “Maybe with more time to prepare…”

Camptos looked aside at Ikai, who was watching from under the oak tree with Idana. “And we’ll need the Heroes. Without them the people won’t follow us, no matter how furious they may be now after this bloodbath in the capital.”

Liriana nodded. “You’re all intelligent men. Gedrel chose you well. It’s true we don’t have an army. But we have a plan to get hold of one. As for when, I’m afraid it has to be now. What’s happened gives us the people’s support. Gedrel’s sacrifice gives us momentum. If we wait till we’re ready, years might go by and we won’t have the advantage we do now.”

“Advantage?” asked Costan.

“We have the people on our side, demanding justice. And we have the surprise factor. Sesmok will never guess what we’re going to do. Not in a thousand years would he expect us to do something as unthinkable as this to overthrow him.”

Silence fell on the gathering again, broken only by the crackling of the fire. In the light of the flames, the faces of the leaders of the Six Counties showed deep concern.

“Are the Heroes with you?” Camptos insisted. “Without them it won’t be possible to rouse the people. They’ll only follow us if the Heroes are with us, leading the way.”

Liriana looked at Ikai and Idana, inviting them to speak.

“I’m Ikai, of the Sixth County. Once I was a Hunter, and because of circumstances… I’m now a Hero.”

“We all know you, and your history, Hero of the Senoca, leader of the Shelter,” Camptos said.

“Good. But you don’t know my whole story, and I think it would be better if you did. It might help you make the right choice. As happened with me.”

“Please, we’re listening,” said Mitas.

“I always believed that family was the most important thing in this life. My mother taught me that. Blood is what unites us, what we must love and protect. When the Gods took my sister away, I renounced everything. I became a Pariah and went to find her. I didn’t care if I had to go to the Eternal City itself and fight the Gods. Unfortunately that’s exactly what I had to do, and I did it. For my sister, for my family, for the blood of my blood. And I wasn’t the only one. Liriana did the same, for similar reasons, for love, for the cause. But one thing sets us apart, Liriana and me… I just wanted to save my sister and go back to our mother, to protect them, as I’d always tried to do. Liriana wanted to come back to fight for the cause, to confront the system. She stayed and fought. I took my people to a safe place, to the Shelter. I always thought Liriana’s choice of staying and fighting – which my sister shared – was wrong. Whoever fights when the chances are as slim as that fails nine times out of ten. And in this game, failure is punished with death. I didn’t want to see either my sister or my mother die. That’s why I set up the Shelter, and for a while I thought I’d reached my goal: I had my family with me in a peaceful haven. They were safe. We’d be happy. All we had to do was leave the Gods alone, not get involved with the cause, and then they’d forget about us.” He gave a deep sigh.

Out of the shadows came Albana, who winked at him and went to stand beside Idana. Maruk too appeared and went to stand behind Liriana.

Ikai shook his head sadly. “But I was very wrong. There’s one thing I’ve learnt, and it’s taken me time and pain to digest it: we can’t hide from trouble. Sooner or later it finds us, and then the consequences are worse. There’s no safe place to hide from the Gods and their servants. Inside or outside the Boundary. As long as they’re in power, we’ll never be safe. Never. None of us. Hiding and waiting till the storm passes will only make

the next one kill us, us and our loved ones. The Gods destroyed the Shelter, and they killed my mother in Osaen. For all that I tried to hide and protect her, I couldn't. And we won't be able to either. We can't stay with our arms folded, we can't hide, we can't create another Shelter, because in the end they'll find us and destroy us. There's only one thing we can do, and that's unite and fight. Destroy them if we get the chance. That's why I'm telling you here tonight that there's only one solution: rebellion. We must unite, take up arms and bring down Sesmok, send the Enforcers away. That's the lesson of life I've learnt, and that's what I'm passing on to you."

They were all staring at him as though hypnotized. They had not expected that honesty, that devotion and commitment. Albana and Liriana gazed at him: the one in disbelief, the other filled with pride.

"Well said, brother!" came Kyra's voice.

They all turned and saw her coming towards them. With her was a tall, slender figure shrouded in a hooded cloak. A little behind them were Karm and Honus, who had let them through.

"Kyra!" Ikai cried delightedly. He was about to throw his arms round her when Albana took his arm. "She has Adamis with her," she whispered in warning.

He nodded and went to his sister, folding her into a tight embrace.

"I'm so glad to see you safe and sound. You had me worried. Where have you been?"

"You worry too much, little brother. I was with him." She indicated Adamis with her thumb. "He's been teaching me some things I have to tell you about."

Ikai's eyes went to Adamis. He could not see his face under the hood, but even so, he greeted him with a bow of his head. Adamis returned the greeting, but said nothing.

"I never thought I'd hear you say those words, ever. I'm stunned."

"Mother's death made me realize some facts."

"I know, me too. I'm sorry to have been such a nuisance all this time."

"You're the best thing I have, little sis. I wouldn't change you for anything."

Kyra smiled and hugged her brother again so hard it hurt her. “I love you too, my level-headed big brother.”

“Let’s go back to the meeting. They must be wondering what we’re talking about.”

She held him back a moment. “I’m so glad to see you, Ikai, and about that change of heart. It makes me really happy. I always knew you’d see things my way in the end.”

They went over to the fire.

Rutus was eying Adamis with distrust, and nor was he the only one. He pointed his axe at the newcomer. “Who’s this? Is he trustworthy?”

“He’s with me,” Kyra hastened to say.

“This meeting’s secret,” said Mitas.

Kyra frowned. “I said he’s with me. Or are you going to question my word?”

Mitas raised his hands. “I’d never doubt the word of a Hero. If he’s with you, he’s with us.”

“That’s good enough.” Kyra glared defiantly at Rutus. The woodsman lowered his axe and nodded.

“You’ve heard my brother lay his soul bare before you,” she said to the Group. “His honesty does him credit. I’m with him, he has my support. I follow him.” She moved away to greet Idana and Albana.

“I’m with Ikai, always,” Albana said, and gave him a roguish smile.

“I’m with them too,” Idana hastened to say as she hugged Kyra.

Liriana nodded. “You already know my position.”

“And wherever Liriana goes, I go too,” said Maruk.

“All the Heroes have spoken,” Liriana said, looking at Camptos, “and they’re with the cause. The people will follow us.”

“There are seven Heroes … there are six here… one’s missing,” said Camptos.

Kyra came closer to the fire. “The seventh Hero, my friend Urda, was captured by the Enforcers. She’s in the Dungeons of Oblivion…” She turned towards where Adamis was standing a few feet away in the shadows, and he gave her a nod.

“I have something to tell you. Something I’ve seen with my own eyes, something they made me watch. Once I tell you, your idea of the Enforcers of the Gods will change. Your whole way of thinking about what the Gods are doing to us will change. But I think you need to know. You have a right to know.”

All eyes stared at her, worried and uneasy.

“Go on.” Liriana encouraged her.

In a voice broken with pain, Kyra told them in detail what she had witnessed inside the Dungeons of Oblivion: what Oskas had done to Urda, what Urda had become once the process was finished. The Heroes and the six leaders watched her in blank amazement, disbelief on their faces.

Rutus was the first to react. “What kind of abomination is this! It cannot be!”

Another voice cried, “I don’t believe it! The Enforcers aren’t human!” And still another: “It can’t be. Are you telling us the Enforcers are our relatives and friends?”

Kyra spoke very slowly, with authority in her voice. “I’m telling you what I witnessed, what they did to my friend right in front of me. What she turned into. I know it’s hard to grasp, but you must. There are thousands of our own people in the Dungeons of Oblivion, and out of them they create the Enforcers.”

“By Oxatsi! It’s horrible! Appalling!” Costan was shaking his head, unwilling to accept what he had heard.

“Damn inhuman Gods!” came a cry.

Costan shouted: “They’re turning us into those things?”

Cries of horror and bewilderment rose to Father Girlai, who contemplated the scene from the sky above. They all had friends, relatives and loved ones whom the Gods had taken away. Knowing this could be their fate was worse than a death sentence.

Rutus got up and brandished his big axe above his head, “I’ll kill them all for this! Death to the Gods!”

The cry was picked up by the others: “Death to the Gods! And then: “Death to Sesmok!” And finally: “Death! Death! Death!” Their cries of anger at this terrible outrage filled the oak wood.

Ikai was trying to take in what his sister had found out. Turning people into monsters in the service of the Gods was something unimaginably evil. The Gods were using slaves to control other slaves. It was an idea worthy of the sick minds of those pitiless creatures.

Liriana intervened in an attempt to calm the mood. “Sit down, I beg you. I feel as outraged as you do. If my soul craved to fight before, it’s even more determined now. If I had any lingering doubts before, they’re gone. We can’t allow them to go on doing this to us. We have to fight. Are you with me?”

“We’re with you, Liriana,” Rutus said. The other leaders nodded emphatically.

She turned to Ikai. “And the Heroes?”

“We are,” he said. Albana, Idana, Kyra and Maruk nodded in agreement.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll fight.”

“You’ve spoken of bringing down Sesmok,” Rutus said, “you’ve told us now’s the time to do it. We’re with you, but what’s the plan? When do we attack? How?”

Liriana gestured towards Ikai. “He’ll guide us to victory.”

Rutus grunted. “Him? He’s a Hero…. and I applaud his honesty and frankness… but you’re the one we follow.”

“And he’s the one I follow.”

“You’re Gedrel’s successor, in our eyes.” said Mitas.

“But that’s the way Gedrel wanted it. Ikai will be the one who leads us to victory. The plan will be his, the strategy we’ll follow to overthrow Sesmok and expel the Enforcers. These are Gedrel’s words: *Ikai is the brain, Kyra the soul, you the arm of this revolution.* That’s what he told me, and I’ll honor his decision. Not just out of respect for him, but because I feel it’s the right decision.”

Rutus scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Old Gedrel always knew what he was doing. He had an eye for these things. If that’s his will, then so be it. I accept.”

“And the others?” Liriana asked.

One by one they all accepted.

“Very well. Ikai, the moment we talked about has come. You must choose. You must decide whether you’ll take charge and guide us in the fight.”

Ikai breathed in the night air of the oak grove deeply, then exhaled slowly. As he did so he looked up at Father Girlai, then down at the men and women gathered there, and meditated his decision, as he always did. But this time he had already made that decision even before he knew it. Solma’s face came to his mind, and he smiled. *For you, Mother, for the Senoca.* He put his hands to his chest and declared:

“I join the cause, and I’ll lead you in the rebellion!”

“That’s the way to talk!” Kyra cried, full of pride and joy.

Ikai went to Liriana by the fireside. “I’m not going to lie to you. Our chances of coming out of this victorious are pretty slim. Almost nonexistent, actually.”

There was a buzz of angry comment at this.

“But we have one possible opportunity,” he told them.

Rutus patted his axe. “We only need one.”

“All right, then,” Ikai said. “I have a plan to turn that opportunity to our advantage. Are you with me?”

“We’re with you!” Rutus cried.

“For freedom!” shouted Kyra.

Ikai raised his fist. “For freedom!”

“For freedom!” came the cry from all.

Chapter 31

Three days had passed since the crucial meeting: days of planning and preparation. That night the sky was clear and warm, and the stars pulsed as if they wanted to send a message of peace and harmony. Kyra had a feeling that it was the calm before the storm.

In the clearing in the oak grove she found Adamis beside the great oak, his hand on its massive trunk, his gaze lost in the moon.

“Mother Nature is wise, and her children incomparably lovely,” he said without turning to look at her. She did not know how he had sensed her presence, but guessed it had something to do with the Power. She put her hand to her chest, where she kept the disc in a leather sachet around her neck.

“They certainly are,” she agreed, gazing at the noble oak outlined against the sky.

“I meant you,” he said and turned to look at her.

Taken by surprise, she blushed. “Stop looking at me with those eyes like the sea at dawn, or they’ll drive me crazy and I won’t know what I’m doing!”

Adamis smiled. “You fill me with delight when you scold me like that.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, I don’t find it funny at all.”

He took her by the waist and kissed her so intensely that she was left breathless. “And… and why that?”

“That is because you always surprise me with your answers. And because I drive myself insane trying to understand you.”

Kyra looked around her. “Be careful, we might be seen. I don’t want them to find you out. We’d be in serious trouble if they did.”

“They are all in the camp on the other side of the Boundary. We are alone in this part of the oak wood.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. Besides, if someone crosses the barrier I will feel it.”

“Of course, I was forgetting that nothing gets past the omnipotent God.”

Adamis laughed. “Why are you like that with me?”

“Because I have to bring you down a notch. You’ve spent all your life with those conceited Gods, and of course you know nothing about anything.”

The God shook his head, smiling. “You are doing that all right, and teaching me all I need to know, with that fiery tongue and temperament of yours.”

She raised her arms and narrowed her eyes, assuming a mock-pompous voice. “Oh, I still have a lot to polish, seeing that Your Highness is a Prince, no less, of one of the mightiest and longest-lived houses.”

“There is nothing I would like more than not to be him at this particular moment.”

She could hear the sadness in his voice. “What’s up, then?”

“Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow everyone will leave, and nothing will ever be the same again.”

“Everything is ready. It’s time to carry out my brother’s plan. Time to go into action.”

“Will you go with them?

“Each Hero will go with one of the County Leaders. I’m going with Camptos. He’s the leader of the Sixth County, which is my own. I want to go with him and help him. He’ll need me.”

Adamis sighed heavily and lowered his gaze.

“I was afraid of that.”

“You know I can’t turn my back on them. They need me.”

“Yes, you are the soul of this rebellion, I know.”

“It’s not that. Six Counties and six Heroes. Each one of us has a vital role in Ikai’s plan. I can’t fail them.”

“I do not want anything to happen to you. What you are going to attempt is madness. It will not work. You will all end up dead. I do not want to lose you, Kyra.”

“I know, but I just can’t stay on the sidelines like a coward because of the risk. I could never do that.”

“You are doomed. You will not make it.”

“You say that so I won’t go.”

“No, Kyra, I say it because I know it is so.”

“The risk doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter if we’re doomed. Even so, I’m going. I’ll fight for freedom until they take my life. And if I don’t make it, if we don’t make it, at least we’ll have taken the first step, we’ll be an example for others to follow someday. And if we don’t, maybe they will. We’ll free the people or else die in the attempt.”

Adamis’s golden face shadowed.

“I was going to ask you to come away with me. To renounce both our pasts, and live a future far from all this, together. But I know you cannot.”

“Believe me, I’d love to get away from here with you, but I’d be selfish if I did that. What right do I have to happiness when thousands of my people are suffering and dying every single day?”

Adamis nodded.

“You do understand, don’t you?”

“I understand. You have a great and noble heart.”

“And don’t forget my temperament.”

“That too.” He smiled.

“Will you come with me?”

“I cannot take part. But I will come, for you.”

“In the end, I’ll make a good God of you,” she said mockingly.

“The one I was, I no longer am. Knowing you has changed me.”

Kyra arched an eyebrow. “Forget the compliments.”

“When I am with you, I am not an arrogant God, I am simply Adamis. When we are together I am as I should be; you make me see life in all its splendor. You make me value each life, each being, as I should, as Mother Nature intended us to. Which is something my civilization decided to forget, believing themselves to be superior.”

“So, you’re no longer superior to me?”

“I wish the day may come when I am a tenth of the incredible person you are.”

She looked at him, mouth agape.

“You make me better, Kyra.”

She tried to speak, and for the first time in a long time did not know what to say. She choked on her own fiery tongue.

“If I could ask for a wish, it would be to be able to be with you like this, as we are now, holding each other, sharing this wonderful night, for the rest of my life.”

Kyra felt a flare of heat explode inside her. It started in her stomach and ran through her whole body until it burst in her mind. But it was not the blast of fury she knew so well. She felt a mixture of excitement and pleasant warmth suffusing every pore of her skin. Adamis’s eyes were a blue sky with white clouds, and she lost herself in them. She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He bowed his head and their lips met.

She kissed him passionately, filled with an overwhelming ardor she did not understand, but which drove her towards him. Their feelings surfaced: undeniable, unstoppable. Their desire and love for one another took over, and they surrendered in body and soul. A white mist enveloped them, and they vanished into it. Kyra felt her surroundings fading until only the sky over their heads remained. He gathered her into his arms, and her excitement made her heart run wild. She suddenly felt herself floating and looked down towards the ground, but it was no longer there. She was floating in the mist, held by Adamis. His eyes assured her there was nothing to be afraid of. She kissed him again, a full, moist kiss, then gave herself over completely to the passion she felt, and two souls joined under the stars.

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High in a fir tree on the edge of the wood, Ikai watched the entrance to the mine. Below, waiting hidden in the thick vegetation, were Mitas, the Miner, the Leader of the Fourth County, together with Karm and Honus.

Hidden in the forest behind them, five hundred slaves waited in silence, not moving a muscle.

Ikai scanned his surroundings. Soon it would be night, and he needed to study every detail before darkness fell. He was about to risk the lives of all these men, and the situation was something less than favorable. His eyes turned to the apron of flat land in front of the mouth of the mine. Among a group of large wooden buildings, hundreds of slaves were working under the iron vigilance of the Enforcers. Behind the mine rose the green-clad mountains whose peaks formed an unsurmountable barrier. *The only access is from the south, which is in our favor.*

He climbed down from the tree, careful to make no noise, and crouched amid the underbrush. Mitas whispered: “What do you think?”

“I’ve counted nearly a hundred Enforcers, mostly Executors. Luckily there aren’t many Eyes-of-the-Gods.”

“There are Tormentors too,” Karm said.

Ikai looked at him in puzzlement.

“They’re the bloody Enforcers they use inside the mines,” growled Honus.

“They’re like the Executors,” Karm explained, “but smaller, and armed with metal rods. They never come up to the surface.”

“And the bastard Executors don’t go below,” Honus added.

“Right. How many of those Tormentors are there inside?”

“At least another hundred,” Karm said. “There are more than two thousand slaves inside that mine. And about five hundred more involved in support tasks on the surface.”

“Your experience is going to be a lot of use to us.”

“It’s the first bloody time being a miner’s been any use to me,” Honus said.

“What do you think?” Mitas asked again.

Ikai eyed the mine thoughtfully. “It’s risky, but we haven’t any other option. We’ll have to take the mine and free the slaves.”

“There are nearly three thousand of them in there,” Karm said.

“If they join my five hundred loyal men,” Mitas said, “we have the beginning of an army.”

Ikai nodded. “That’s the first part of the plan. We have to gather an army to rise with. We must free the mines and quarries to recruit an army of slaves. It’s the only way.”

“Understood,” Mitas said.

“I’m ready to kill a few Enforcers,” growled Honus. “What are we waiting for?”

“We’ll attack at midnight.”

“And Rutus and the other men?” Karm asked.

“They’ll all attack at midnight tonight as well. It’ll be a coordinated attack. We must all go in at the same time to give Sesmok and the Enforcers no chance to react. It’s essential if the plan’s to succeed. We have to strike at the same time in all six Counties, and move fast. The objectives have been chosen carefully: places where slaves are massively concentrated.”

Karm nodded. “Like this mine…”

“Exactly.”

“Which building are the Executors in?”

“The biggest one, by the cave-mouth.”

“And the other buildings?”

“In the furthest one are the surface slaves. The two in the middle are for storage.”

“Right.” Ikai said thoughtfully.

“Are we going to attack all at once at nightfall?” Mitas asked.

Ikai shook his head. “No, we have five hundred men. The hundred Executors would destroy us. Five to one isn’t enough. I don’t even think ten to one would be. Our men don’t know how to fight. They’re slaves, workers, not warriors.”

“And so…?”

“I have an idea,” Ikai said. “It might work… Let’s get ready. We don’t have much time.”

He went back into the forest, where the men were waiting. He ordered silence and went to stand in the middle. He called fifty men around him and

spoke to them in a low but firm voice.

“You have a right not to do what I’m about to ask of you, because it’s your life you’ll be sacrificing for the cause. The decision is yours, not mine. When I give the order, you decide. I’ll accept your decision, whichever it is.”

He explained the plan, then went on to the remaining men, repeating the message and the plan.

“Will they do it?” Karm asked.

“They’re decent people, and brave ones,” said Mitas, “but we’re asking a lot of them.”

“When the moment comes, we’ll see,” said Ikai.

“What if they chicken out?” Honus asked.

“Then we’ll all die.”

At midnight Ikai gave the signal, and the plan was set in motion. He took Karm, Honus and twenty archers with him, all with bows, quivers of arrows and large satchels on their backs. Bent almost double, they ran to a group of rocks and hid behind them.

“How many?” Ikai asked in a whisper.

“I can see a pair of Executors by the door of each building,” Karm said.

Honus craned forward. “Two others at the mine entrance.”

“Good. We’ll go around this flat area to the outermost building, where the slaves are. Careful with the torches. We mustn’t be seen. If we are, that’ll be it. We’ll be dead, the lot of us.”

They moved on with care among the shadows of the night and came to the back of the building where the slaves were kept. Here they hid behind bushes, without going any closer.

“To your positions,” murmured Ikai.

They dropped on one knee and readied their bows. Ikai moved to the back wall of the building, peered round and saw the shadow of one of the Executors keeping watch at the front. *This is the moment of truth. Protect*

us, Girlai, Father Moon, because your children the Senoca need you. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. His heart was beating fast, and in the silence of the night it felt like a hammer at his temples. *I must keep calm.* He breathed deeply once again, and his iron determination took command. Bending over and picking a stone from the ground, he measured the distance, then threw it hard along the side wall. The stone bounced off the ground several times and rolled in front of the Executors.

“Who’s there?” one of them cried in a cavernous voice.

Ikai watched with one eye, his face glued to the wall, his body hidden. The two Executors appeared at the side of the building. He pulled his head back like lightning and waited a moment, listening. The heavy footsteps of the two Executors reached him, coming toward him. He retreated along the wooden wall. The footsteps were now clearer and closer. *They’re almost here.* He drew sword and knife and readied himself. Both Executors turned the corner and appeared in front of him.

“Who…?” one of them began. Twenty arrows from the vegetation to his right riddled him. He swayed unsteadily, but did not fall.

The second Executor turned toward the hidden threat. Ikai launched himself at the Enforcer’s feet and stabbed his thigh with both sword and knife. The monster groaned, and in a reflex act hit Ikai with the spear as if attacking some noxious animal which had bitten him. Ikai flew backwards and hit the ground hard. The Enforcer raised his arm to throw his spear. Ikai swallowed, twenty more arrows riddled the Executor. The monster grunted, lowered his arm and fell to one knee.

“Fi… nish them…” Ikai managed to mutter.

Karm and Honus hurled themselves on the Executor and knifed him repeatedly in the neck, wrenching off both helmet and breastplate. The others, following their lead, attacked the first Executor and stabbed him again and again until he fell dead.

Honus helped Ikai to his feet.

“Playing cat and mouse is one thing,” the giant whispered, “but this is more a case of the mouse biting the cat,”

“You shouldn’t risk yourself so much, Ikai,” Karm said. “We need you alive.”

“I’m… fine,” he said, clutching his chest, which hurt horribly. He saw triumph and pride in the archers’ eyes. “They need me to guide them by example.”

Honus slapped him on the shoulder. “If you’re going to face up to an Executor, then you’d better leave it to me. At least we’re the same size.” The giant’s big hand felt like a mace to Ikai, but he appreciated the gesture.

“And now what?” Karm asked. “We free the slaves in that building so they join us, right?”

Ikai shook his head. “It’s the most logical thing to do, but no. It would be too noisy, and we’d be found. It’s not the right moment.”

“So, what next?”

“We need to reach the Executors’ barracks.”

“We have to pass the storage sheds…”

“We will.”

Karm nodded. “And now?”

“Now we chop the heads off these two.”

Karm opened his eyes wide. Honus smiled from ear to ear. “I like your plan more and more every minute. I really do.”

Ikai winked. “I hoped you would.”

The second building was a storage shed, with two more Executors posted at the door. The group approached stealthily. The situation was more complicated now. They were in the center of the open area, and although the rear of the store gave them some shelter, they had to go as carefully as they could. Luckily the entrance to the cave and the Enforcers’ barracks were more brightly lit, and there were black spots to hide in. They followed these to the back of the storage shed.

The two Executors guarding the storage building heard a sound to their right and turned. Rounding the corner and coming towards them came two new Executors. They walked slowly in the shadows, and their helmets tilted slightly forward with every step. The two Enforcers on guard looked at them in puzzlement. It was not time for the other shift yet. This was not in the rule-book. When they were no more than a pace away, the two coming Executors stopped.

“What the…?” one of the Enforcers on guard began. The spear wielded by the Executor in front of him buried itself in his neck. His companion turned to act, but found the other Enforcer’s spear buried in his own neck. He tried to defend himself, but it was too late. Honus and three other men appeared behind the Enforcers and finished them off, swiftly and savagely, then dragged the bodies inside the store. Ikai loosened the Enforcer’s cloak he had worn clasped round his own neck, covering the dead Enforcer’s head he had put on top of his own.

Karm laid the other head on the ground. “I can’t believe it worked.”

“Luckily they’re not too smart,” Ikai said. “Their intelligence has been severely damaged. They carry out the Eyes’ orders and have a few basic functions to guide them. Facing up to other Executors isn’t one of them.”

“And they don’t see too well at night, either,” Honus said.

“You told me they never go into the mine, that the Tormentors are inside. That’s what gave me the idea.”

“You’re a lad with ideas, and good ones,” Honus said. “I like that.”

“Let’s hope one of them doesn’t kill us all.”

“Don’t worry, Ikai, it won’t do that,” Karm said, and the assurance gave him confidence.

“So, what’s next?” Mitas asked.

“Now we take the barracks,” said Ikai. He spoke confidently, trying to convey something he did not altogether feel himself.

“There are a hundred or so Enforcers there.”

“It won’t be easy, but there’s no other option. Go back to the men and be ready for my signal.”

“We won’t fail you. Trust us.”

Ikai nodded, and Mitas left.

“Ready to kill a few heartless bloody Enforcers,” Honus said.

“For freedom,” Karm put in.

Ikai’s eyes went to the rest of the group. Brave men. Men who would sacrifice themselves for the cause that night. He took a deep breath. *For freedom!*

They left the storehouse and went to the rear of the Barracks. They could go no further without being seen. To their right were four Executors on watch duty by the pens. To the left, the entrance to the mine, with another half-dozen Enforcers. At the door of the barracks four others were posted.

It's time. I hope their brave hearts don't fail them now.

He put his hands to his mouth and hooted like a barn owl, three times. From among the trees there came a faint murmur, which grew in intensity as Mitas' men gained speed. They were running along the open area in silence, without a single shout, trying to muffle their footsteps, trying to avoid being seen until the last moment.

And then came the dreaded cry of alarm.

"Slaves! Watch out!"

All the Executors on duty hurled themselves at Mitas' men. It was as though a huge wave had broken against a few rocks in a cliff. The rocky Enforcers began to deal death among the wave of slaves. And the sea was blotched with red.

"Executors, to me!" cried an Eye-of-the-Gods.

The slaves moved on, avoiding the Enforcers. They ran with one purpose only: to prevent the Executors from the Barracks from coming out and getting into formation.

Ikai gave his men the signal. From the satchels they carried on their backs they took oil-skins and started to drench the walls of the barracks. They began with the back wall and the two side ones, while the first Enforcers to come out lined up before the doors.

The wave of slaves broke against them. A hundred determined men hurled themselves at the barrier formed by twenty Executors. They were killed before they could even reach them. But that did not stop them. The slaves came at a run and threw themselves with all their might at the Enforcers. They were run through with spears, but they struck the Enforcers with all the momentum of their bodies. That was their purpose. The first wave broke and died against the enemy barrier. But the next ones began to sweep the Enforcers back. First the outer ones, until they reached those in the middle.

They're not flinching! They keep going! They're heroes!

“Form a barrier! Form!” an Eye was shouting to those inside the Barracks. But the doors were not wide enough to let the Enforcers out.

Mitas and five men knocked the Eye aside. Before another barrier could form, fifty men blocked the doors with their bodies. The Executors ran them through from inside, but the rest of the men were pushing to stop them coming out.

“Now let’s go!” Ikai ordered, and his men set fire to the oil. The walls of the building burst into flames.

Ikai ran to meet Mitas.

“Block the exit!”

A group of men appeared with an enormous iron sheet. While Mitas’ men pushed against the door, they passed the sheet over their heads and used it to block the door. On the outside, three hundred men were pushing to stop the Executors coming out, while the flames devoured the building.

“Follow me!” Ikai called to his group. He led them towards the Executors still standing in the open area. The fight was brutal. Honus fought as if he were one of the Enforcers himself, with Karm always at his side to help him. By the time they had finished with the Enforcers, only the two of them and one other man were left standing.

“Push! Push!” Mitas shouted to his men.

The ceiling collapsed in flames on the Executors, followed by the two side-walls.

“Get back!” shouted Ikai.

A dozen Enforcers appeared amid the flames, their bodies burning, trying to escape the fire. The slaves moved away and let them wander aimlessly about while the fire devoured them.

After a short while the whole building collapsed, and not a single Enforcer came out alive.

“We did it!” Karm shouted.

“Tonight I’m having broiled Enforcer for dinner!” cried Honus.

“Victory!” shouted Mitas’ men.

“We did it,” the County Leader said to Ikai. “Your plan worked.”

Ikai pointed to the pile of bodies. “So it did. But we paid dearly for it.”

“They went willingly. They knew the plan.”

“Even so… we’ve lost more than two hundred men.”

“Their sacrifice will lead us to freedom, Hero of the Senoca.”

“I’m no Hero of the Senoca. They are.”

“For the Heroes!” came a shout, and it was picked up by the rest: “For the Heroes!”

“Now it’s time to take the mine and free the miners,” Mitas said.

Karm arrived with Honus at that moment. “How are we going to do it?” he asked. “There are plenty of Tormentors down there.”

Ikai thought for a moment. “We’ll do it with light. A lot of light.”

Karm understood. “Get some torches ready. A lot of them.”

The fight inside the mine was brutal and chaotic. But just as Ikai had guessed, the Tormentors were vulnerable to light. They had been created to work in the darkness of the deep mines. This advantage turned out to be decisive. They fought till dawn, taking level after level of the mine, until they reached the very deepest. They lost another hundred brave men, but their lives freed two and a half thousand slaves. In all, more than three thousand were freed from that accursed place. They were all assembled in the open area outside the mine, to wait until they had got used to the light of day.

Ikai addressed them. “My name is Ikai, I come from the Sixth County. I’m one of the seven Heroes.” The slaves started to whisper and murmur, in a mixture of incredulity, fear and joy. Ikai gestured to them to let him continue. “Today is a great day for the Senoca. Today, for the first time in our history, for the first time in a thousand years, we’ve risen against the Oppressors.”

The murmur rose again, and this time there was no doubt it was one of fear.

“Today the Rebellion begins. We’ve conquered this mine. We’ve set you free. What seems impossible can be achieved by the will of an oppressed people, and this is proof of it. And just as with you, right now, all across the six counties other groups of slaves are being liberated. The Heroes and the leaders of the rebellion from each county are freeing the people, just as

we've done here. The Rebellion has begun, and now we're going to bring down Sesmok and the Enforcers."

The murmuring gave way to cries of astonishment.

"I know it's hard to believe. I know it's hard to accept. But think about it. Did you imagine this morning that a group of Senoca would come to set you free? Did you ever think it was possible? That a bunch of Senoca might defeat the Enforcers? And I'm telling you now: we've done it. We've killed the Enforcers, we've freed you. And in the same way we're going to free all the Senoca. We're going to rise against Sesmok and the Enforcers, and we're going to topple them. All of them together, in one go. The Senoca will be free."

The rumor ceased. Voices in favor began to be heard among the slaves. Some cried to the sky, others encouraged the remainder to rise and fight. Some, defeated by fear, by a life of slavery, resisted. But little by little the majority started to lean towards rebellion. And soon the whole open area was filled with voices in favor of fighting, in favor of freedom.

"Will you fight with me to gain your freedom?" Ikai asked exultantly.

"We'll fight!"

"Will you follow me into battle?"

"We'll follow you!"

"For the Senoca! For freedom!"

Three thousand throats broke into cheers to the heavens.

Ikai's heart filled with joy. He could not have been prouder of his fellow-countrymen. *Thank you, Oxatsi. Thank you for infusing courage into their noble hearts.*

Mitas came to his side. "We did it. Now what? What are your orders?"

"Listen carefully. It's vital that you follow the plan closely."

"I'm listening."

"Take a third of the men and go through the whole County. Recruit all you can, in fields, hamlets and places where you don't find too much opposition. Don't go near the capital of the County or the bigger villages. The Guard and the Enforcers will be getting ready to fight you."

"Very well. I'll do that. What about you? Don't you need me?"

“There are two more mines in this County. I’m going to free them.”

“May Oxatsi protect you!”

“You too, my friend,” Ikai said. “You have a week. In a week’s time, bring your men to the meeting-point.”

“Only a week? I could recruit more men if I had more time.”

“If we give them time, they’ll get ready and it’ll be too late. Time’s our enemy.”

“All right. One week.”

“And one thing more. It’s important.”

Mitas nodded.

“You must spread the rumor that you’re going to attack the County capital.”

“But I don’t understand. You just told me not to go near –”

“Don’t. But we must make the Guard, the Proxies, and the Enforcers believe that we’re going to attack the County capitals. It’s the logical move, what Sesmok expects us to do. He’ll have to defend six counties at the same time, and it’ll be very hard for him. Even with the Guard and the Enforcers to back him up.”

“But we won’t do it…”

“No, you must make them believe we’re going to. On the seventh day they must be convinced we’re going to attack the County capitals.”

“But instead of attacking, I’m to lead my men to the meeting-point.”

“Exactly.”

“What about Rutus, Camptos and the other leaders?”

“You all have the same order. We’ll all follow the same plan.”

“I get it now.”

“Remember, in a week’s time I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I’ll be there, I won’t let you down.”

They embraced.

Ikai said his farewells to Mitas and his men as they left.

In a week. In just a week the fate of the Senoca will be decided. Freedom or death.

Chapter 32

Kyra hurled her dagger with a whiplash movement of her right arm. The sharp steel buried itself up to the hilt in the Guard soldier's neck. The man fell to one side, dead, and his spear never managed to pierce Camptos, whom he had on his back on the ground.

"Than… thanks…" he stammered. "I thought my time had come."

Kyra offered him her hand to help him up. "Not if I can avoid it,"

"I'm just a farmer, I'm no match for a soldier of the Guard."

"You're much more than a farmer. You're the leader of the Sixth County, my county, and as long as you're with me I'll do everything I can to make sure you survive. We need you."

Camptos acknowledged this with a grateful gesture.

The houses of the lower, easternmost part of the city were burning. Black smoke rose to the sky. In front of Kyra and Camptos the soldiers of the Guard had secured the main square and were resisting. The freed slaves had just taken the four main entrances to the city and were securing them. Through them were thronging several thousand farmers armed with axes, hammers, hoes, forks and any other utensil that might be used as a weapon. It was as though a hungry horde had taken over the city. The cries were deafening. Thousands of souls were shouting for freedom, for justice, even as they were run through by spear or sword.

Camptos turned to Kyra: "And we need you. You're one of the Heroes. You shouldn't take such risks."

Kyra shrugged. "That's the way I am. I'll be where the action is."

"The city's ours," he said.

Watching it all, Kyra scratched her head. Something was not right. The Guard was forcing back the waves of slaves, forming a barrier which would soon fall under the weight of sheer numbers.

“Yes…”

“And just in time,” Camptos went on. “We need to leave at once, to get to the meeting-place. The week’s up. Your brother will be waiting for us.”

“I told you not to worry, that we’d make it.”

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to doubt you. It’s just that Ikai gave specific orders not to attack the county capitals…”

“And what did I tell you?”

“That we’d be able to conquer it.”

“And what have we done?”

“We conquered it.”

“Well, there you are.”

“But Ikai’s plan… the timing…”

“Now we’ll have ten thousand more slaves from this city and the villages around.”

“That’s true, yes.”

“The whole Sixth County’s ours. How many men do you think will follow us?”

“With those who’re joining us in the capital, I calculate about twenty thousand men.”

She winked at him, full of pride. “None of the other leaders will have assembled even half, including my brother. You’ll see.”

“But we’re way behind time. We’ve wasted two days taking the city. We won’t get there in time, and Ikai is waiting… the plan…”

“Don’t worry, we’ll follow the plan, just as soon as we finish here.”

Camptos sighed and shook his head. “So, what now?”

“Now let me have a friendly chat with those soldiers of the Regent. Then we’ll regroup and go meet my brother.”

“Do you think it’s wise?”

“There’s something that doesn’t smell right.”

“All the more reason not to run unnecessary risks.”

“I brought you here, didn’t I? Don’t doubt me now.”

“All right. Shall I call the ceasefire?”

“Go ahead.”

Camptos looked for two of his helpers and gave the order. Several horns echoed through the city. The rebel peasants, carried away by the euphoria of the moment, found it hard to digest the order to stop. Camptos’s men, who knew the signal, told the others, although it took a while to reach the front lines who were facing the soldiers of the Guard. At last they all ceased their attack. The soldiers, not understanding what was going on, retreated and tightened their lines. They had no way of escape, and they knew it. They were completely surrounded by rebels, on all four corners of the main square. Kyra made her way through them, Camptos by her side. Behind them were their most trusted men. Kyra stopped three steps from the line of spears and shields, as if they did not worry her in the least.

“Who’s in charge?” she asked in a firm voice.

The rebels fell silent, as if Mother Oxatsi herself were speaking.

There was a moment of doubt among the soldiers. Finally, an officer spoke from the center of the enemy lines.

“Me. Captain Sistos.”

He stood up straight and Kyra had a clear view of him. He was a veteran officer, with a weathered face and small black eyes.

“Captain, my name is Kyra. You might have heard of me. I’m one of the seven Heroes. But that’s not important. The important thing is that I’m in charge of this revolt in the Sixth County. As you see, I’ve been quite successful, don’t you think?”

The Captain did not know what to say. “Sesmok will make you pay for this dearly. You’ll pay in blood and suffering.”

“Hmm, but, you see, I have other plans for Sesmok. I’m going to hang him from one of the balconies of his palace so that everybody can see him die.”

“This revolt is insane. It won’t succeed. You’ll be crushed like cockroaches.”

She shrugged. “Well, it was insane to come out into the open, too, and yet here we are. But you see, I have a question for you. I want you to think carefully before you answer, because your life and that of your men is at stake.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“Well then,” Kyra said. With her finger she counted the first line of soldiers, then the lines further back. “I can count three rows, a hundred men each. That makes twelve hundred, which is odd. When we attacked the first farms and villages seven days ago, all the soldiers of the Guard were summoned to regroup here. I was told that if we attacked the city we should have found four times that number. What a surprise, eh? And not just that: the Proxies and Enforcers have disappeared. Now isn’t that strange…?”

“I don’t know… what you mean…”

“Oh, I think you do. You know very well. Where are they?”

The Captain did not reply. All of a sudden he drew his sword and raised it. “Die, you bitch!”

From three high, hidden positions three arrows flew in search of Kyra’s heart: one from the East, another from the West and the last from the North, cutting the wind with a murderous whistle.

Adamis’s message in her mind was instantaneous: *Protect yourself!*

Kyra, with Adamis’s disc in her left hand, closed her eyes, like a prisoner sentenced to death awaiting the impact that will kill him. But she gave an order: *Shield.* There came a golden flash, and a moment before the arrows found their target a translucent sphere surrounded her. The arrows hit the shield but failed to pierce it, falling to the ground as if by magic.

Cries of pure astonishment filled the square. In the eyes of the rebels, who could not see the protecting shield around her entire body, she had stopped the arrows with her mind.

She turned to address her people, who were watching her spellbound.

“What you’ve just seen is the Power of the Gods. Only this time it’s been used against them. But don’t be afraid. We, the Heroes of the Senoca, can do this. We’re going to use it to lead you to victory.”

“It’s not possible!” the Captain swore.

Kyra turned to him. “Is that all you’ve got for me?”

“You ought to be dead!”

“I’m Kyra, Hero of the Senoca! I’ve faced men, Enforcers and Gods. And nothing has stopped me. Nor will it!” She turned her back on the soldiers as if they were nothing, and spoke to the rebels.

“Today, united, we free the Sixth County. Today we achieve that longed-for freedom. Follow me, and tomorrow not only this one, but all Six Counties, will be free. I promise I’ll kill Sesmok. I promise I’ll drive out the Enforcers. I promise you we’ll be free. The Senoca will return to the Sea. Follow me and we’ll achieve this!”

Among the thousands of rebels one word, one name began to be heard with growing strength:

“Kyra!”

“Kyra! Kyra! Kyra!” Thousands of throats cried her name in unison.

She pointed at the soldiers without even a glance at them and gave the order: “Forward! For freedom!”

The rebels hurled themselves at the soldiers like a pack of wild animals.

Camptos leaned closer towards Kyra. “He hasn’t told us where they are.”

“Don’t worry. I thought they might be hiding, waiting for us, that it was a trap.”

“It was. A trap to kill you.”

“Exactly. To kill me.” Kyra thought for a long moment. When she spoke at last, her expression was worried. “This tells me two very important things.”

Camptos glanced at her, confused.

“One: we have a spy among our people.”

The man nodded. “I agree. They were expecting you. And the second?”

“I have to warn my brother. His plan isn’t going to work.”

“We won’t get there in time. We’re too far behind schedule.”

“He’s heading into a trap. Let’s get a move on!”

Chapter 33

Ikai gazed at the immense plain which stretched at his feet. All was silent; the early evening breeze ruffled his hair, and for a moment he relaxed. Soon it would be dark. He gazed at the winding blue line of the Hibai River as it crossed the open space from east to west. It seemed to want to reach the sun before it disappeared beneath the horizon: an eternal dream it would never achieve. *Just like our dream of freedom.* No sooner had he thought this than he regretted it. *I mustn't doubt. I can't weaken. I must stand firm. We'll make it. I must keep faith that we'll find freedom.* He was not easily discouraged, but this day was proving particularly difficult. Only the First County had reported back, and the sun was about to set.

And what about the others? Will they come? Will they have been successful? Could they be dead? His plan was deeply risky, but there was no other option. Attempting to organize an undercover revolution would have been guaranteed to fail. Sesmok was a highly intelligent man. Ikai knew now that he had spies among Gedrel's men, as with Isaz. He would have found out about it. Sesmok was well aware of his intention to organize a rebellion, and he would send the Hunters.

He shook his head. Organizing the rebellion would take too long, and it could never be done in secret, no matter how hard he tried. And if not Sesmok, it would be the Enforcers who found out about them. The system of control established by the Gods was extremely efficient. Brilliant —he had to admit—: brilliant and ruthless. He had weighed up the situation and come to the conclusion that a secret insurrection would be impossible. Little by little all the leaders would be captured, starting with the Heroes. What had happened to Gedrel was proof enough of that.

He looked out toward the east. *Nothing. No trace of them. But they'll come. Have faith.* There was only one viable chance of success: a surprise uprising, without allowing Sesmok and the Enforcers to prepare. *It's the only way. Very risky, all or nothing, but the only way to have a chance of*

winning. It's not much, but it's a possibility, and we'll cling on to it. Gedrel's sacrifice and the bloody incident at the capital had given them a unique opportunity. The people, bleeding and outraged, longed to rise. This was the moment for it, before the horror of the oppressive measures ate away at their brave hearts. They would follow now, but not for long. The horror of blood always swallows up the courage in the hearts of men.

He looked westward toward the long line of trees, but there was no sign of them. He began to feel genuinely uneasy. *Suppose they haven't made it? Today's the seventh day. Today's when they all have to come with the men they've managed to assemble in each County.* But night was falling on the green fields and forests behind him and there was no sign of them.

He turned to his men, who were waiting in silence hidden among the beeches. They had freed and assembled close to ten thousand men in the Fourth County.

Mitas came up to him. "They'll come. I'm sure of it," he said in an attempt to cheer his spirits.

"I hope so. Otherwise the fallout will be devastating. If we fail, Sesmok will have no mercy. He'll raze the six counties to the ground in punishment."

"I'll tear that poisonous snake's head off with my own bare hands," Honus growled.

Suddenly a flash reached Ikai from the East. It was the signal he was waiting for.

At last!

There followed a second flash, then a third. It was the Third County. They had made it.

"They're reporting at last." Mitas said.

"Only two counties so far."

"Three, counting ours," Karm said, his eyes shining with hope. "Let's wait. They'll come."

Ikai put his hand on his shoulder. "You've got a great spirit."

"I've got nothing left except the cause. The Gods robbed me of everything. And whatever I've got left I'll give for freedom. We have to bring Sesmok down."

“And do away with those shit-faced Enforcers,” Honus barked.

Ikai smiled. They had devotion and courage aplenty. But it would take a lot more than that to topple the established order.

They waited impatiently for hours. Well into the night, two flashes were seen to the West.

“That’s the Second County,” Mitas said.

“Finally,” Karm huffed.

Ikai breathed deeply. “Only Kyra’s missing now. I hope she hasn’t done anything crazy. She should be here by now.”

Nobody said anything. They all knew Kyra and her temperament.

“Honus, go find the Heroes and Leaders and ask them to meet in one hour.”

“Now I’m a messenger? If I’d known, I’d have stayed in the mines.”

“On your way, and stop whining about everything,” Karm said, and gave him a shove.

“Mitas, these forests are huge, leagues and leagues of beeches, oaks and pines. That’s why I chose it to hide our men. But it’s no use hiding if we’re seen or heard. Spread the word: no fires, no chatter. We mustn’t be found out.”

“Okay, right away.”

“Karm. The three bridges across the river, further down on the flat land. They need to be watched. Take twenty men and be on the alert. If you see anything strange don’t attack, come and tell me at once.”

“All right. Trust me,” he said, and vanished among the trees.

Ikai greeted everyone as they arrived. Mitas of the Fourth County was by his side. Gant of the First County arrived, and with him Liriana. Ikai cheered up a little, seeing they had made it back and that Liriana was well.

“Hunter,” she greeted him with a wink and a smile.

“Captain,” he said in return.

Costan of the Fifth County followed, with Maruk. They exchanged greetings and embraces. Maruk sat down beside Liriana and kissed her enthusiastically. Then came Rutus of the Third County, accompanied by Idana.

“Everything okay?” Ikai asked her. He had not been at all happy to send her to fight. She was too devoted and good to get embroiled in the brutality of war.

“Everything was fine. Rutus barely needed me. He has great charisma. The men followed him without a moment’s doubt.”

“Well, having a Hero beside me helped, that’s for sure,” the robust woodsman said. “It was a good idea. I wouldn’t have thought of it myself, but there you are.”

Finally Pasmal of the Second County arrived with Albana. She smiled at Ikai, and his heart leapt with joy. An instant later his stomach lurched, and he felt uneasy and relieved at the same time.

She sat down beside him. “Did you miss me?” she whispered in his ear.

The tingling her sensual voice gave Ikai made him forget for a moment where they were and what they were risking. This woman made him lose his senses. He smiled back.

“Very much,” he said affectionately.

They all greeted each other and exchanged tales of what had happened to each group during that intense and dangerous week. The third and fourth counties had not encountered many difficulties and had got a great number of people to follow them in the revolt. But it had been very different in the First and Second counties, where it had been very difficult to convince the people to follow them. Liriana explained that even after freeing villages and herds from the control of the Guard and the Enforcers, they had not succeeded in getting as many followers as they had expected.

“I tried everything,” Liriana said. “I harangued them, I explained passionately, I tried to show them the path to freedom, leading by example. But they were too terrified.”.

“Don’t blame yourself, Liriana. I’d already guessed we wouldn’t get many in the first two counties. That’s why I sent you to the First. If anybody could have managed it, you were the one. You’re a born leader.”

“Why didn’t you expect to get so many?”

Ikai sighed. “Because they’re the richest counties. It’s not just that they’re afraid, they don’t suffer as badly as the rest.”

“How many did you recruit in the Fifth County, Costan?”

“More than fifteen thousand men and women.”

“And you’re right,” Maruk said. “They didn’t take much convincing. I didn’t even have to show them I can get them to cross the Boundary.”

“It’s the same people and the same terror,” Ikai said to Liriana, “but not the same suffering. In the richer counties they know they can survive after all, but not in the poorer ones. That’s the difference.”

Liriana nodded. “Now I see it. I’ve always lived in the capital. For me these differences aren’t so obvious, because I’ve never experienced them.”

“How many did you manage to bring?”

“Five thousand…”

“Same as us,” said Pasmal of the Second County.

“Rutus?”

“Ten thousand in the Third County.”

“Another ten thousand in the Fourth,” Mitas said.

Ikai was thoughtful. “That makes a total of forty-five thousand men and women.”

“And Kyra and Camptos are still to come.”

Ikai nodded, still deep in thought.

Karm came out of the trees. His forehead was sweaty, and he was out of breath.

“What’s up?” Ikai asked.

“Hun… ters…”.

“How many?”

“Three… complete parties. One for each bridge.”

“And probably two more bringing up the rearguard.”

“They’ve found us,” Albana said. “They’ll have orders to spy on our forces and report to the Regent.”

“And capture us if they see the possibility.”

Liriana’s face was somber. “What are we going to do, Ikai?”

“We have no choice now. We have to go on.”

“And Kyra and her group?”

“We can’t afford to wait. By dawn Sesmok will know our position and strength. We can’t afford to give him time to react.”

Their eyes turned to him.

“We’ll march on the capital with the first light. Get yourselves ready.”

No matter how he tried, Ikai could not rest that night. His mind would not stop tormenting him about what might happen come dawn. With the first light and the twittering of the woodland birds he got up. A morning mist covered the plain. The wet grass spattered his leather boots with droplets, and the morning freshness together with the invigorating smell of wet earth filled him with new strength.

“Sure you don’t want me to go with you?” Albana whispered beside him.

Ikai turned, gazed at the exotic brunette’s wild face and shook his head. “No, I need you here.” He held her face in his hands, looked at her tenderly and kissed her with passion.

“It’s very risky,” she warned him. There was deep concern in her eyes.

“So, it is. But I know him, he won’t take risks. Trust me.”

“There’s nobody I trust more,” she said, and kissed him with all her being.

Ikai left her with a faint smile and headed for the group of riders who were waiting for him. He greeted the five county leaders respectfully. Behind them were a hundred mounted archers. Karm was holding a horse ready for him. He mounted the beautiful animal and looked out across the plain. The mist was fading before the sunbeams, revealing moist fields. He made out the river, and beyond it in the distance the walls of Osaen, the

capital. He considered it for a moment: there it was, within reach of his hand, yet as distant as a star in the sky.

It'll work. We'll take the capital and put an end to Sesmok.

This had been his plan from the beginning: to get hold of enough men to take the capital. Forget about the counties and their secondary capitals. The one crucial thing which might lead them to victory was to attack Sesmok in his fortress, all or nothing: take the city or die. Sesmok would not anticipate such folly, for folly it was. The most logical thing would have been to take the county capitals and secure them, gathering more men as the days went by and growing stronger. But Sesmok would have thought of this, and that was why Ikai had decided to do the opposite. *Luck smiles upon the daring*, he told himself, trying to calm his nerves and the doubts he felt.

"Let's go," he said to his men, and they went down towards the river.

At a trot, they approached the city. The Hunters would already have reported their presence to Sesmok. But Ikai was counting on that. They crossed the river and reached the great city. Six hundred paces from the walls, he raised his hand to stop. They looked up at the battlements.

Not a soul.

They kept silent, with the tension so strong in the group it seemed it would snap like the branch of a tree. The city gates were closed. There was nobody in sight. A gloomy silence enveloped them. The city looked dead, or at least waiting for death. All of a sudden they heard a great creak followed by two shriller squeals, and both enormous reinforced steel gates began to open. Nervousness spread through the group, but Ikai turned in the saddle to quiet them.

"This is what I was expecting. Everybody stay calm. Get your bows ready, but nobody let loose unless I give the order. Understood?"

The riders nodded.

Rutus asked: "Any particular target?"

"You'll all aim at one target alone. The one I bow my head to."

"Right."

"But remember, don't attack unless I give the order."

"Understood."

There were about a thousand riders in the group coming out of the city. A dozen or so rode at the head, with the rest forming a compact group behind them. Ten paces away, they stopped. Sesmok, riding a velvety black stallion, led the group: straight and haughty, as though the whole Boundary belonged to him. Accompanying him were Lord Hunter Osvan and Svariz, the Commander in Chief of the Guard. Behind them were the ten regiments and a thousand riders of the Guard. All wore shining blue and white dress armor, and helmets with white plumes. They were impressive: well trained, gleaming soldiers.

Ikai swept his gaze over them and noticed one unusual detail. Behind Sesmok, Osvan and Svariz was an Eye-of-the-Gods: one for each of them, as though covering their backs. But there were no more Enforcers in the entire group.

“Ikai, the Hunter,” Sesmok said, with a sarcastic smile.

“Sesmok.” Ikai bowed deeply, which indicated to his group who they should aim for, even though they had guessed as soon as they saw him.

“A lot has happened since we last met.”

“Indeed it has.”

“You won’t be holding a grudge against me, will you?”

“For torturing me and trying to kill me? Of course not,” Ikai said, with a sarcasm more to be expected from his sister, which surprised him.

Sesmok laughed and waved his hands. “Good answer. What happened to your sister… what was her name? The one you wanted to rescue?”

“You know very well. I went to Alantres, the Eternal City, and rescued her from the Gods.”

There was a silence. Sesmok was not at all pleased with that reply in front of his men. His eyes were fixed on Ikai like two arrows of pure hatred.

“So says the rumor, even if it’s untrue.”

“It is true. And you know it.”

“Tell me who you have with you, if you’d be so kind.”

“These are the leaders of the Counties.”

“Leaders? Oh, you mean of your insignificant revolt…”

“Not so insignificant, otherwise you wouldn’t be here chatting with me.”

Sesmok made light of it with a twitch of his mouth. “I felt like talking to you, that’s all. And what about the famous Heroes?”

“I prefer to keep them out of this meeting.”

“You’re an intelligent young man. I noticed that the first time we met. You don’t want me to see their faces, am I right?”

“I’d rather leave them aside.”

“Very smart. Although sooner or later, you’ll all hang. You can’t hide them forever.”

“Maybe, or maybe you’ll be the one who hangs, along with all those with you.”

Osvan and Svariz reached for their swords amid cries of outrage. Ikai’s group tensed their bows. All aiming at Sesmok.

“Wait! Everybody wait!” Sesmok ordered.

Ikai gestured to his men not to attack.

“This is a civilized meeting, among civilized leaders. I want no bloodshed.”

Ikai had to choke back a retort.

“I’ve known about your insignificant rebellion for some time.”

“I’d guessed as much.”

“Really? Or did you believe you could fool me?” The Regent shook his head dramatically. “I’ve always been one step ahead of you.”

“That’s what you think,” Ikai said in a hard voice, although doubt was beginning to stir inside him.

“Hand yourself over, and I won’t punish the people. I want the Heroes. The rest can go back to their duties and I’ll forget what’s happened. Today I’m feeling particularly benevolent.”

“Leave the Boundary peacefully. You, your people, and the Enforcers. Then there’ll be no need for bloodshed.”

Sesmok laughed, a deep, disdainful and wounding guffaw. “If you think you and your rabble can defeat me, my army and the Enforcers, you must have lost your reason beyond any hope of understanding.”

“Nobody’s going to deny us our freedom. Neither you, nor the Enforcers. Go now and keep your lives.”

Sesmok’s face darkened. His eyes shone with hatred.

“You’re fools who have no idea what they’re doing. Do you really believe a bunch of farmers in ragged tunics, armed with sickles and rakes, can defeat the Guard and the Enforcers? You’re dragging them all to their deaths. Their mutilated bodies will drench this plain with blood. Their entrails will serve as food for the scavengers tonight. You’ll all die, and I’ll enjoy watching the sight.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You underestimate the value of Freedom that burns in their hearts. They’re not simple farmers, they’re men and women who are fighting for freedom, and every one of them will gladly give their life for it. They’ll fight with the strength of conviction and hope. They’ll fight like lions.”

“And they’ll die like animals.”

“Do you accept my offer?”

Sesmok laughed disdainfully. “Of course not.”

“Nor do I accept yours.”

Sesmok shook his head with a haughty smile.

“Before I leave, let me show you how mistaken you are, how stupid this attempt at rebellion is. How futile insurgency is.”

Ikai nodded.

Sesmok pointed at Rutus. “That big ugly one there. Let him loose an arrow at me.”

Surprised, Ikai glanced at Sesmok, then turned to Rutus and nodded at him to loose his arrow.

The leader of the Third County let fly. The arrow crossed the distance with a deadly whistle, straight toward Sesmok’s face. But two hand-spans before reaching him it struck a translucent barrier it was unable to penetrate. With the impact, the barrier became visible. It covered Sesmok’s entire group. Ikai understood now why the Eyes were there. He narrowed his eyes and in the hand of one of them saw a disc. It gave out a golden radiance.

“Do you still want to try?” Sesmok asked triumphantly. “You haven’t the slightest chance.”

Ikai was concealing the growing concern in his stomach. “We’ll see.”

Sesmok gave the order, and the group began to retreat. He stopped and looked at Ikai.

“How did you know I’d come to talk to you instead of sending the Hunters to capture you?”

“Because this revolution will make you look very bad before the Gods. And they don’t forgive inefficiency. I knew you’d try to avoid confrontation to save face before them.”

Sesmok smiled, spurred his horse and left.

Ikai turned to his men. “To the river, fast!”

The gates to Osaen stayed open. Ikai was watching them from one of the bridges over the river. A rhythmical noise began in the city, and the birds left the plain to take refuge in the forest. The breeze itself seemed to hide as if it could sense the arrival of eternal night. Through the gates Sesmok’s army was coming out onto the plain. The soldiers moved with regular steps, to the rhythm of each regiment’s drums. Thousands of soldiers in perfect formation, their armor spotless, with spears and shields of steel, showing off their martial training, were on their way to stand in front of the walls.

“Do we move forward?” Liriana asked.

“Not yet. I need to know how many men he has before we advance. I won’t show my cards until I see his.”

“Right. The leaders have come back with their men. They’re waiting for your signal.”

“Why’s he coming out of the city?” Albana asked suspiciously. “Why doesn’t he shelter behind the walls and wait? That would be the most sensible thing. He’d have the advantage.”

“Because he’s an oaf,” Liriana said. “He thinks that if he shows us his army we’ll run away in terror. He has no idea how wrong he is.”

“There’s something in that,” Ikai said. “But there’s something more. He can’t risk a long siege. The Gods would turn against him. Right now the

counties aren’t producing, the Gods aren’t receiving their goods. They’ll be asking for Sesmok’s head soon.”

“So why don’t we wait?” Liriana asked.

“Because we don’t want the Gods to step in,” Albana said.

“Correct. We need to take control before the Gods react. I don’t even want to think what they’d do if they found us besieging the city. Time’s against us, it’s the enemy, just as much for Sesmok as for us. That’s why he’s coming out into the open. He wants a quick battle, a clean easy victory he can report to the Gods.”

“I see,” Liriana said, her eyes on him. “How right Gedrel was. He chose you for those wits and that cool head of yours, and he wasn’t mistaken.”

Ikai could feel all the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders. “I hope not,” he said.

Albana stroked his cheek. “Go on thinking. Go on leading us. Never doubt your head.”

He gave her a grateful smile.

“They’ve formed two big rectangles,” Liriana said. “One on each side of the great gate.”

“How many men?”

“I can count… about… Fifteen thousand”

“It’s what I’d calculated there’d be in the city. We’ve caught him before he could summon the rest of his men from the county capitals and the areas around.”

“The plan’s working,” Albana said.

“Yes. For the moment.”

Liriana pointed to the gates. “Look, the Enforcers.”

“They’re coming out to fight too. I wasn’t sure whether they would.”

“They’re forming a triangle between the two squares of soldiers. The Executors make up the three sides, with the Eyes in the middle.”

“That’s an odd formation,” said Ikai.

“I can count about fifteen hundred Enforcers. Five hundred per side…”

“Plus the Eyes,” Albana said. “There are more than two hundred of them.”

The three groups formed and held their positions. The regiments waited in readiness for battle. The drums beat, and a sense of evil foreboding hung over the plain. Suddenly the drums fell silent. With a roar from thousands of throats the three formations presented arms. The soldiers raised their shields and prepared their spears. The Enforcers each moved a leg forward and brandished their spears.

“They’re trying to frighten us,” Albana said. She could feel the dark pressure of the threat.

“Well, they’re succeeding,” said Liriana.

“We’ll pay them in the same coin,” Ikai said. He let out his breath deeply. “I won’t let them scare us. The hour has come.”

“Shall I give the order?” said Liriana.

“Go ahead.”

Liriana took the horn she carried at her waist and sounded it. Three times.

From among the trees on the hills which filled the horizon to the north, the Senoca began to come down. First the leaders of each County, then their men. Thousands of men and women, their faces painted blue in honor of Oxatsi, Mother Sea, hands painted red to remind them of the deaths and oppression suffered for a thousand years. Armed with rustic axes, forks, sickles, spears and bows of their own make, dressed in their working tunics, also painted blue, without any armor. But ready for anything, for the sake of freedom. Forty-five thousand slave souls came down as if they were Mother Sea herself, covering the entire plain with blue as far as the river. And they stopped. The whole stretch of land from the river to the forest, as far as the eye could see, was covered by slaves in search of freedom.

Ikai looked at the enemy army for one last time, then at the host of brave Senoca who were waiting for him, and made his decision. They would attack. He mounted his horse and rode along the riverside, greeting his warriors.

He drew his sword and addressed them as he trotted along the great line.

“There they are!” he shouted to the blue tide. “The Regent’s army! The Enforcers of the Gods! They’re waiting to subdue us! To shed Senoca blood, as they’ve been doing for a thousand years! They’re the ones who stand between you and freedom! Take a good look at them! This is no

dream. There they are, and beyond them is our longed-for freedom! Will you let them deny it to you? Will you let them subdue you again, force you back into misery and slavery? Or will you fight here today, face them, claim what's yours by right? Tell me! The decision is yours, yours is the word. What do the Senoca say?"

He rode along the entire line, then went back to the center to await the answer.

"What say you?"

"Freedom!" the Senoca cried. "Death to the Oppressors!"

"What say you?" he asked again, rising on his stirrups.

"We'll fight!"

"I can't hear what you're saying!" he prompted them.

"Death to the Regent! Death to the Enforcers!"

"Will you follow me?"

"We'll follow you!"

"For freedom?"

"For freedom!"

Ikai's gaze lingered on the brave faces, eyes shining with determination, red fists raised to the sky.

"Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" the Senoca yelled.

The clamor of those seventy-five thousand throats was so loud Ikai thought it would deafen him. But with each shout from each man, each woman, he was aware that the hearts of the enemy soldiers shrank, for they knew they were on the side of the oppressor, on the side of injustice, and that seventy-five thousand fevered Senoca were about to hurl themselves on them.

He gave a final glance at the bridges and the river. He knew that once across, there would be no possible retreat. They would be trapped between the capital and the river.

All or nothing, he said to himself.

And he gave the order: "Onward! For freedom!"

Chapter 34

And the Senoca crossed the river.

They advanced with their leaders at the head.

Three hundred paces from the enemy forces they stopped.

The two armies, slaves and oppressors, eyed each other for a long, icy moment.

Ikai raised his sword. The six leaders followed suit, and with them the Heroes.

And they charged against the forces of slavery.

“For freedom!” cried Ikai, spurring his mount.

“For freedom!” the Senoca roared to the sky like wild lions. Thousands of throats roared as they launched themselves at a run against the enemy. The cries filled the plain, reaching the defenders and the city behind them with a deafening roar. An immense blue tide, the personification of Mother Sea Oxatsi herself, fell furiously on the three enemy formations. The rebellion had exploded in a tidal wave of frenzied slaves, determined to sacrifice their lives in the pursuit of freedom.

Tensely, the soldiers of the Guard awaited the approaching avalanche. They were the breakwater in front of the walls of the city, trying to prevent the gigantic wave from dragging them away and then flooding the city with the blue of freedom.

The officers of the regiments shouted orders to their men.

“Square formation! Front Line, shields forward!”

The soldiers obeyed, their minds following orders, their hearts unsure whether the formation would hold against the tremendous impact it was about to suffer.

“Hold your position! Dig your heels in!” Svariz shouted in the center of the right-hand rectangle.

In the triangle formed by the Enforcers, a sinister silence hinted at what was about to happen. The Executors, legs flexed and spears held out in front of them, waited like stone statues. In their outstretched hands the Eyes-of-the-Gods showed Discs of Power.

And the great Senoca wave broke against the enemy lines with the roar of a thousand storms. For a moment time seemed to stand still. The clash was brutal. Bodies of running slaves were hurled back into the air in all directions as they struck the first iron-hard enemy lines. Soldiers of the Guard were thrown backwards, taking with them the men immediately behind them. The Executors withstood imperturbably, with only a few of them swept away by the great wave. And time began again. Shouts broke out in every direction. Wild cries from the Senoca as they hurled themselves against the formations, cries of despair when they were thrust back or died beneath spear or sword. Cries of horror when they struck the Enforcers and left no mark on them. The battlefield became tinged with red as the blood of the people soaked the plain of Osaen.

The rebels attacked with all the courage of their enslaved hearts, striking tirelessly, furiously, with their rustic weapons against the enemy shields and armor, yelling wildly. The front lines of both rectangles of the Guard suffered multiple casualties in the initial assault. For an instant it seemed the lines would not hold, would succumb before the pressure of the gigantic blue wave.

“Shields in a square!” the Regiment Captains ordered their soldiers.

The lines compacted, and the soldiers of the Guard took a few steps back to form a tight wall of shields against which the Senoca crashed .

“Hold! Don’t let the first line fall!” ordered Commander Svariz.

The Senoca outdid themselves, completely surrounding the enemy formations and reaching the foot of the city walls. The enemy armies were left like three islands in a blue sea so choppy that any ship would have foundered in it.

A little to the rear, Ikai watched the battle and the walls with the sealed gates. They had no way of taking the city, not while the enemy armies were at its gates. His only hope was to manage to defeat Sesmok’s forces in the battlefield, then take the city.

“We’ve got them surrounded,” Karm said beside him, “but we’re not managing to break their lines.”

“We have to put pressure on them,” Albana said. “We have to break their formations.”

“The bastards won’t give in!” growled Honus.

Ikai turned to him. “Honus, sound the charge!”

The giant put the horn to his lips and gave three calls. In reply, the six County leaders began to send wave after wave of their braves against the enemy. The Senoca attacked the formations, trying to swallow them up, pressing in all directions at once. They attacked without respite, again and again, with all the rage in their hearts.

“Close shields! Push them back!” Svariz was calling out. While the first lines on each side of the square held back the attacks and stood firm with their shields, the second line stabbed the rebel slaves mercilessly. The Senoca were dying, the ground fast becoming a sea of blood and corpses. When the front lines of the soldiers of the Guard fell under rebel pressure, they were quickly replaced by men of the second row. In turn, the inner lines replaced those who had moved forward. They formed a killing-machine which worked with deadly co-ordination.

Karm watched that lethal efficiency at work. “For each of theirs, dozens of ours are falling!”

Downhearted, Ikai nodded. “They’re very well trained. They’re professional soldiers. If we can’t break those formations, we’re finished.”

“By the hairs of my beard!” Honus cried. “But there are so many more of us!”

Albana narrowed her eyes as she watched the fighting. “So there are, but numbers don’t guarantee victory in the battlefield.” She pointed to the enemy square on the left. “In the art of war, a very few well-trained soldiers in close military formation can overcome a multitude. We’re in a really tight spot.”

And if the situation was difficult for the Senoca trying to break the two formations of soldiers of the Guard, it was utterly impossible against the triangle of Enforcers. The Executors were decimating the rebels, with the dead piling up at their feet. The Enforcers were suffering very few casualties; their lethal physical superiority was so obvious it was beginning

to affect the rebels' spirit. Around the triangle of death there formed a void, filled with corpses. The Senoca did not dare go near. Everyone who attempted it died pierced by a spear or had his throat slit by a knife in the shape of a half-moon before he could even reach the line of Enforcers. And if any of them did reach it, he was unable to finish off those deadly monsters.

Karm glanced aside at Ikai. "We've got to do something. We're being massacred!"

Ikai dismounted and turned to three young men behind him.

"Warn the leaders: we have to open a breach in the lines of the Guard. Tell them to charge with everything they have. We've got to break it. Half of you will attack the left-hand square with me. The other half, attack the right-hand square with Liriana."

The three messengers nodded and ran off through the throng.

"And the Enforcers?" Albana asked.

"It would be madness to attack the Enforcers. We have to focus on the Guard."

"If the Enforcers swing round and attack, they'll destroy you."

"We'll have to risk it."

"I'll keep them busy," she said.

"No!" Ikai cried, more fiercely than he had meant to. "No, it's crazy. I don't want you facing them."

She smiled roguishly. "Maybe you're afraid something'll happen to me."

"Of course I'm afraid something'll happen to you." He took her face in his hands. "I don't want you to risk yourself, least of all against the Enforcers. I need you beside me."

Albana smiled and kissed him. "You're a very bad liar, Hunter, you don't need me beside you. I know how to take care of myself. Don't worry." She kissed him again and then vanished in the crowd.

"Albana, no!" he called uneasily after her. But she had already made her decision, and there was no way he could stop her.

He turned to Karm and Honus, who were waiting for his orders.

“Are you with me?”

“To the end!”

“Then follow me. I’m going to breach that line, even if I have to kill them all with my own bare hands.”

“That’s the kind of talk I like!” Honus said.

The three of them made their way through the rebels until they reached the front line of soldiers in the left-hand square. Ikai went up to the three men who made up the center of the line. They were waiting motionless, with their shields before them forming a wall.

“Move aside,” he told his own people, who obeyed immediately.

He pointed to the one in the middle. “That one’s for me. Karm, you take the one on his right, and you, Honus, the one on his left. Keep an eye on the spears and swords of the second line. As soon as we get any nearer they’ll try to skewer us.”

“Got it,” Karm said.

Ikai pointed with his sword, drawing his knife with the other hand. “We’re going to open up a breach here! Follow me!”

And the three attacked to the cry of “For Oxatsi!”

The messenger passed the order to Liriana, who nodded and turned to Romen and Maruk.

“We’re going to breach the line. Romen, you come with me. Maruk, you stay behind.”

“In your dreams! If you go I go too!”

“I don’t have time to argue, I’m the one who gives the orders. You’re not a good warrior, and we’ll need you to free us from the Rings. You’re staying behind, and there’s nothing more to be said. I’m not putting you at risk in the front line of battle.”

He waved at the rebels around them. “I can use a sword as well as any of these people,” he protested.

She gestured towards the ground around the enemy square, scattered with bloody corpses. “You’ll die too, just the same as them. You stay.”

“But…”

“Are you going to make me hit you?”

“No…”

“Good. Subject closed. I need some more support. Bring me Rutus, Mitas and their men.”

Romen nodded and sent two messengers.

“Woodsmen and miners… at least they know how to use an axe and a pick, and they’re as strong as oxen. They’re the best we have. They’ll have to do.”

Albana moved to the apex of the Enforcers’ triangle. Nobody was attacking them. The rebels were watching them two paces away, unsure what to do. The Enforcers seemed fixed to the ground like statues. She did not like this at all. Why were they not moving? They could wreak havoc among the rebel lines if they started to penetrate them. But it was as though they were waiting for an order which never came. She looked around for the Leaders. The somber faces of Ganat and Pasmal, of the First and Second Counties, showed not fear but impotence. Their eyes were worried, their clothes soaked with blood.

“I need a hundred archers,” she snapped. “Find them for me among your men.”

The two leaders stared at her.

“Archers? In the middle of this mess?” Ganat said.

“Do I have to say it again?”

“Of course not, Hero of the Senoca,” Pasmal said, instantly obedient. And both left in search of archers.

Albana stretched out her arms and started to walk backwards. As she did so, everybody in her way moved back.

“More space,” she said, gesturing to right and left.

The men formed a human chain with Albana in the middle and began to move back. They pushed at the lines behind them, giving them the order to retreat. With some difficulty, they managed to organize the maneuver. She counted ten paces, then stopped. The horde of Senoca behind her stopped with her.

“Keep this distance.”

With the poise of a consummate assassin, she walked the ten, now empty, paces back until she was standing face to face with the Executor at the apex of the triangle.

“You’ve only got a few moments left to live,” she said coolly. “Wouldn’t you rather break formation and kill me?”

The Executor did not reply. With a lightning move he tried to pierce Albana with his spear. But the tip of the weapon stopped two finger-breadths short of the brunette’s chest.

“If you want to kill me, break formation.”

The Executor seemed to hesitate. In his internal struggle, his killer instinct began to get the better of him. His right foot shifted an inch, but immediately he drew it back and took up the same hieratic pose again.

“As you wish… well then, I’ll have to kill you. You and the ten on your right and the ten on your left.” She shrugged, turned and walked back to her own people.

The Senoca could not believe her daring. They stared at her as if she were a goddess. The hundred archers came and formed a line in front of the human chain.

“Keep the chain,” she said to Ganat and Pasmal. “Don’t let anybody pass it, and don’t let them disturb the archers.”

“You heard her,” said Ganat.

Albana was staring at the Executor at the apex. “Now we’re going to play Shoot the Enforcer,” she said with a grim smile. “Choose ten on this one’s left, then release.”

There was a moment of doubt. Of incredulity. They would move. They would tear the archers to pieces.

“Do it!” Albana ordered furiously.

The archers released their arrows and the ten selected Enforcers received ten each.

“Excellent,” she said, watching the Enforcers’ reaction. Of the ten, half fell to the ground badly wounded. The rest remained standing, although not for much longer. She waited for a moment, and the order from the Eyes arrived. The fallen were replaced by other Executors from the inner lines, but they neither advanced nor attacked. She turned to the archers.

“Same again. Choose ten to my little friend’s right.”

The archers did not hesitate this time. They loosed their arrows straight away.

Albana went across to Ganat and Pasmal, who were staring at her in puzzlement.

“We keep shooting till they break formation. Or until something else happens. Nobody’s to go near them. Get some more archers and repeat this same operation on the three sides of the triangle. We have to wear them down. If there aren’t enough archers, bring spears. Understood?”

“Understood.”

Albana turned to the Eyes-of-the-Gods in the center of the formation.

What are the bastards waiting for? she thought, and began to feel very uneasy.

Liriana drove her knife into the soldier’s groin, freeing his shield. The man would bleed to death in a matter of moments. She glimpsed the spear-tip the soldier from the second line was thrusting straight for her chest, and deflected it with her other short sword. To her right, Romen’s spear pierced the eye of the soldier in front of him. The enemy spear from the second line missed him by two finger-breadths.

“Good strategy,” Liriana said.

Romen smiled. “If they use it, why not us?”

“I prefer this,” said Rutus. He delivered a tremendous blow with his double-headed axe on the soldier’s shield. The impact was so brutal that the soldier flew backwards, toppling the men of the second and third lines behind him in the process.

Mitas laughed. “Not bad at all, but what about this?” and with a massive blow with his huge two-pronged pick, he wrenched the shield off the soldier’s arm. Before the man could react, two of Mitas’ men skewered him with thick wooden spikes.

“Keep it up!” Liriana shouted. “We’re opening up a gap!”

“Close lines!” they heard Svariz bellow.

“I’m going to get to that pig and cut him in half!” Rutus said.

“Not if I get there first,” said Mitas as he wrenched off two shields with two massive blows.

“Svariz is mine!” Liriana said.

Rutus delivered another mighty blow with his axe, opening up a breach in the wall of defenders. “As you wish!”

“Close lines! Close them!” Svariz shouted again, and this time his voice was tinged with fear.

Ikai blocked the enemy sword and buried his knife in the soldier’s neck. Blood spattered his face, and he had to wipe his eyes with his forearm. When he looked again he saw the tip of a spear coming straight at his throat. With no time to react, he twisted his head sharply aside. The edge of the tip cut his neck, and he stepped back. He touched the wound, fearing that the cut would be lethal and he would bleed to death.

Honus, beside him, was staring wide-eyed. “By a freaking hair’s-breadth!”

Despite the blood, the wound was not deep enough after all.

“Yes, a hair’s-breadth,” he said to Honus with a wink, and went for the next soldier in the line.

Karm and Honus dispatched enemy soldiers with something approaching the skill of expert warriors: Honus with massive blows, sending shields, armor, men, flesh and bone flying before him, Karm with fire as well as finesse stabbing ceaselessly, lethally, to right and left. They were opening up a breach in the left-hand square, and more Senoca joined them to help them. Together with Ikai, the three formed the tip of the sword which was opening up a way through the enemy lines.

“Forward!” Ikai cried to his people. There was hope. The lines were breaking.

Suddenly Costan shouted:

“Ikai! Ikai! To me!”

Ikai thrust his sword deep into the soldier’s thigh, slicing through flesh and tendon. The man lost his balance and Ikai kicked him hard, throwing him backwards and taking the man behind with him. He turned toward the leader of the Fifth County, who was gesturing to him from a little way back.

“What’s up?”

“Come here! Quick!”

“Hell!” He turned to several of the rebels beside him, “Keep widening the breach. We’ve got to get to the officers. Don’t stop until you reach them, then kill them all.”

Three men took his place immediately and started laying about them with spear and axe.

Ikai ran to Costan, who pointed to the east. When Ikai looked that way, expecting to see the plains with the forest behind them, he was confronted with a sight which started a knot forming in his stomach. An army of soldiers of the Guard was coming from the east, in a long line that reached the river.

“By Girlai!” he cried.

“It’s worse than that,” said Costan. He pointed to the west, where another line of soldiers filled the whole plain as far as the river.

And then Ikai understood.

“It was a trap. We’ve fallen into a trap.”

We’ve been betrayed, and now there’s no way out.

“We can still retreat,” Costan said.

Ikai shook his head. “We can’t cross the river. They’d hunt us down as we tried. We’d be trapped, and they’d slaughter us like cattle.”

“But where are those two armies coming from?”

Ikai sighed.

“Sesmok has fooled us. They’re the armies of the six county capitals. They shouldn’t be here, they ought to be at their posts waiting for us to attack there and not here. Somebody warned Sesmok of our plans.”

“They’ll be on us soon. Shall I call the retreat?”

Ikai considered the situation coolly for a long moment, then he made his decision.

“No. We’ll do the opposite of what they expect. Give the call to charge. We have to take the two formations before they reach us on both flanks.”

“Are you… sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything. If we retreat we’ll be massacred. Give the call to charge.”

“Right away, Ikai.”

Liriana heard the horns give the call to charge as she watched the new enemy army approaching from the west.

“Ikai’s sounding the call to charge,” Romen said, looking worried.

“It’s the only action likely to work. Advance or die. We have to open that gap in their lines, or we’re done for.”

Rutus turned to her, his face and body covered in blood. He stared at the enemy army in the West, then turned to his men. “People of the Third County! With me! To the end!”

Mitas called to his own men: “All to me! We have to breach the line!”

The men and women of the third and fourth counties threw themselves against the square of shields, striking with all their heart, yelling like madmen.

Liriana glimpsed Svariz in the center of the formation. He was smiling, a wide self-satisfied smile. He knew they were on the brink of winning, of

finishing them off. Something inside her began to burn with such intensity she could not hold it back.

“Romen, with me,” she said, and launched herself like a lioness on the line. She would manage to reach Svariz and wipe that dirty smile off his face even if it was the last thing she did. Romen followed her at once.

The brave fighters of the third and fourth counties, following their leaders, gave all they had. But their courage was no match for the expertise of the enemy soldiers. For every one they managed to bring down, countless rebels fell amid deafening cries and roars.

Despite this, Rutus, Mitas and Liriana managed to make a breach, wielding blows right and left, as though driven by a bloodthirsty madness. They formed a trident which made its way on into the enemy lines until it reached the last one.

“Stop them!” Svariz shouted to his officers.

The men threw themselves upon the three. Mitas hit the first one with his pick and slashed off his helmet with his head still inside it. But the move left him unprotected, and a well-aimed blow from another officer beside him pierced his heart. The miner swerved to look into the eyes of the officer who had killed him, raised his pick and buried it in the soldier’s head. The officer stumbled and fell dead. Behind Mitas, his men were entering the square, breaking the last enemy line.

“Mitas!” Rutus yelled. Overcome by rage and pain, he cleared a way for himself until he reached the two officers who were covering Svariz. They attacked him simultaneously, and the giant woodsman could only manage to avoid the first one. The other, with an expert feint, buried his sword in his side. Rutus swung his axe over his head and with a brutal circular sweep decapitated both. But the wound forced him to sink to one knee.

Svariz rushed up to him and aimed a stroke at his neck. Lirana’s sword blocked the blow at the last instant.

“Don’t even think about it, you snake,” she said.

“Captain Liriana. I’ve heard a lot about you.” He gave her a patronizing smile as he circled her with his sword raised.

“I’ve heard about you too. Today you’ll pay for all the suffering you’ve caused the Senoca.”

Svariz laughed disdainfully. “It’s too late, rebel. They’re already here.” He gestured at the army which was arriving from the west. “I’ll put you all to the sword.”

“Maybe, but you won’t live to tell anyone about it,” said Liriana, and lunged at him. They exchanged sword blows, feints, and blocks, each measuring the other’s strength. Svariz was an exceptional swordsman, and soon he showed evidence of the fact with a feint and stroke that reached her arm. His eyes glittered with hatred.

Liriana, unflinching, kept up her attack. But Svariz’ skill soon cut her again, this time in the leg.

“You’ll all die. Sesmok has ordered us to wipe you out. I’m not prepared to let a single rebel out of here alive.”

Liriana attacked with a flashing stroke to the heart, but the Commander blocked it and with a sharp punch knocked her down. He raised his sword while Liriana, stunned, struggled to her knees. He was getting ready to deliver the coup de grâce when there came a dull thud. She thought he had run her through, but felt no pain. When she looked up at Svariz she saw a grimace of pain and surprise on his face. Blood was trickling out of the side of his mouth. He fell to his knees and tried to say something, but blood filled his mouth. Gurgling, he fell to the ground dead. In his back she saw Rutus’ axe buried. Liriana realized the woodsman had dragged himself to them while they were fighting.

“You saved me,” she said.

Rutus, on his knees, put his hand to his side and could not articulate a word. He collapsed to one side.

Liriana looked around. The fighting was so thick she felt in the midst of a sadistic nightmare. But they had managed to breach the formation and were inside the square. Now the rebels were attacking inside as well as out, and the square was falling.

Romen hurried beside her, his face covered with blood. He waved towards the eastern army.

“They’re almost on top of us,” he said.

“I know. And we’ve lost Mitas, Rutus, and two-thirds of our forces. This looks pretty bad.”

“Perhaps Ikai …” Romen said. There was hope in his voice.

“Maybe, but I doubt whether he’s doing any better than we are. Let’s get ready. They’re here. It’s time to die for our country.”

In the center, Albana’s archers had caused many losses among the Enforcers. But just as she had expected, they were only gaining time for themselves. Suddenly they started to move all at once, with absolute precision.

They were waiting for the reinforcements. Now they’re on their way, they’ll start to attack.

The whole triangle moved forward. As they did so the Executors attacked with their spears, catching the rebels unawares. The archers kept releasing their arrows until the triangle was upon them.

“Move away!”

But it was practically impossible to do so in the midst of the host of Senoca who surrounded the enemy formation. All of a sudden, at an order from the Eyes, the triangle moved east. It took the archers on that side by surprise. Before they could find safety they were run through mercilessly.

“Don’t let them get you with their spears!” Albana shouted. “Everybody move back!”

There came another order. The triangle moved first north, then west. The spears sought the bodies of the rebels who had not been able to get out of their reach, and a multitude of them were run through.

“They’re going to wipe us out …”

Suddenly the triangle turned on itself and veered diagonally towards the north-east, the area where the rebels were densest. The Executors buried their spears in the bodies of the rebels with deft, powerful blows. Ganat did not manage to get away fast enough and was run through.

“Retreat! Get out of their way!” Albana cried desperately.

In the left-hand square Ikai was fighting like one possessed by evil. He killed with the coolness of a lunatic and the urgency of one who knows his remaining moments of life are numbered. Beside him Karm and Honus dealt death as if they were envoys sent by the Lady of Eternal Night. With a tremendous kick Honus sent the last of the defenders ahead of him into the square.

“I opened up a breach!” he roared, like a god of war.

Ikai and Karm hastened to secure the gap which their enemies were already trying to close.

“To me!” Ikai called, and Costan came at once with the men of the fifth county. They fought bravely and managed to secure the open way through the enemy lines. Costan ran into the square, followed by his men, and faced the officers. The fight was brief and brutal. Before Ikai could reach them Costan died, run through by the officer in command. But the rebels hurled themselves on him and finished him.

“They’re ours now,” said Karm.

“Yes, but at what a price,” Ikai said, seeing the number of brave dead Senoca.

Honus gestured at the army marching from the east.

“There are too many of them, the bastards. They’re here now. And we’re screwed.”

Ikai nodded in agreement. At the center of the fray, the triangle of Enforcers was wreaking havoc among the rebel forces. Further to the north a thick, cold mist was coming down from the forest to cover the entire plain. The bridges and the river had already vanished under that damp white cloak. Now they were denied even the option of a desperate escape. In that fog it would be impossible to cross the river.

A cruel fate’s in store for us.

“Not even a miracle would save us now,” he said wearily.

Karm turned to face the approaching army. “Well, I’m not going to give up,” he said. “I joined the cause for this, to fight for freedom. Today’s a great day for the Senoca, whether we live or die.”

Honus came to stand beside him. “Bah! If I have to die, let it be with you,” he growled. “I wouldn’t know what the hell to do by myself.”

Ikai came to stand beside the two miners. “If you’ll allow me, it’ll be an honor to die fighting at your side.”

“For freedom!” said Karm.

“For freedom!” cried Ikai and Honus, and faced the enemy who were almost upon them.

Ikai dealt death with sword and knife, together with Honus, Karm and the men of the fifth county. But the enemy forces were far superior in number. A cut above his eyebrow made him step back. There was blood in his eyes and he could not see. He wiped it away with his sleeve and saw six enemy soldiers hurl themselves on Honus. They felled him as they would an oak.

“Sons of bitches!” Honus yelled. But he was finished. An enemy soldier was preparing to run him through while the rest held him down on the ground. Ikai tried to reach him, but he was three paces too far behind. The soldier raised his spear above his head with both hands, aiming at Honus’ chest. The spear started to come down, and Ikai cried out helplessly.

“Noooo!”

The soldier arched his back, gave a moan and dropped his spear. Karm appeared behind him, his sword deeply embedded in the soldier’s back. Karm pulled the sword from the soldier’s body, and suddenly it was he who arched his back. Ikai buried his sword in one of the soldiers who were holding Honus, then in another. But he noticed the look of pain on Karm’s face, and when he turned to him he saw the two spears coming out his back.

“Karm!” he cried. Two enemy soldiers had skewered him from behind. Ikai ran to him, but the two soldiers freed their spears and buried them in Karm’s back once again. Overcome with fury, his sight blurred, Ikai put an end to the two men who had killed his friend. Karm fell forward. Honus managed to free himself. Like a force of nature unleashed, he stood up, hurling off enemy soldiers as he did so. He reached his friend and crouched by his side.

“Karm, no!” he said, and held his friend’s head between his massive hands.

“I… can die… happy…” Karm gasped. “Fighting… for freedom…” Blood appeared under his body and formed a puddle. “I’m… going to join her… she’s waiting…” and he died.

Honus let out such a rending howl it seemed the sky itself was splitting apart.

“You bastards! I’m going to kill you all!”

Ikai looked at Karm’s lifeless face and knew they were doomed. He breathed in deeply and prepared himself for the end. He would die happy, fighting for what he believed in, for what he thought was just. He felt the breath of the wind on his face and hair, and suddenly the fog advancing on them vanished completely, as if carried away by the breath of the seas.

And under it was Kyra.

And with her, twenty thousand Senoca.

Ikai saw her arrive as though she were a goddess of salvation.

“Kyra…” he stammered incredulously.

They had moved forward under cover of the fog, coming down from the forest and across the river. And now they were here.

Kyra raised her sword to the sky and shouted:

“For freedom!”

The twenty thousand Senoca fell upon the enemy troops like enraged wild lions. The ensuing fight was as brutal as it was brief. The Senoca cut down the enemy troops, who were taken by surprise, unable to position themselves in a defensive formation, and were decimated by the rebels.

Seeing themselves lost, the enemy survivors fled. But not so the triangle of Enforcers, who retreated to the gates of the city. The rebels surrounded the Enforcers, forming a semi-circle around them, leaving some fifteen paces in between to protect themselves from attack. The Enforcers did not move. They seemed to be waiting for orders.

Albana was watching the formation when Ikai arrived. She winked at him, and he smiled with joy at seeing she was all right.

The lines of the Senoca parted to let the savior through.

“I’ve never been so happy to see you, little sis,” Ikai said to Kyra, and folded her into his arms.

She smiled and hugged him back. “It looks as though I got here just in time,”

“You can say that again,” Liriana said, appearing among her men. “You’ve saved us. You have no idea how close we were to perishing.”

“You’ll have to explain that trick with the fog,” said Albana with a wink and a sly grin, “but now we have to finish them off before they cause any more damage.” She gestured toward the triangle.

Ikai considered the situation. “Sesmok won’t open the gates for them, he won’t run that risk. They can’t go back. He’s abandoned them to their fate.”

“Any ideas?” Liriana asked. “If we attack now we’ll be able to defeat them, but we’ll lose a lot of men in the process.”

“I have one,” said Ikai. He whispered something to several of his men, who ran away at once.

Night was beginning to fall over the plain, where thousands of dead bodies had tinted it red. The red which was the price they had paid for reaching freedom.

Ikai’s men came back carrying great barrels.

“Wine? This is no time for celebrations,” Albana commented, amused. She was beginning to see what he was up to.

“Not wine, oil,” he said with a smile. “Honus, do the honors.”

The giant seized an axe. With two sharp blows he broke both lids of the barrel. Then he lifted it above his head and went over to the triangle.

“This is for Karm, you bastards!” he said, and launched the barrel with all his strength against the front line. It broke on impact and soaked them in oil. Without pausing, he picked up the other barrel and did the same. “This is for those who’ve fallen!” he cried, and threw it against the other side of the triangle. Twenty slaves followed him and launched the remaining barrels at the enemy, seeking to reach the greatest number of Enforcers.

Abruptly the Eyes-of-the-Gods gave the order to move forward.

“They’ve guessed what we want to do” said Kyra. “They’re trying to escape.”

“Let them through,” Ikai ordered. “Don’t attack!”

The rebels moved back to create a wide corridor, and the triangle began to advance along it.

“Now!” Ikai rapped out.

On either side of the corridor, two hundred archers came forward to stand in line. In their bows were burning arrows.

“Release!”

The fiery arrows fell on the Enforcers, and on contact with the oil the flames leapt up. In eerie silence, without breaking their formation, without a single cry, the Enforcers burned. The lethal triangle was soon a funeral pyre. They burned to death amid the cheers of the rebels.

Kyra patted his shoulder in approval. “Great plan, brother. It does credit to that head of yours.”

“Thanks.”

She stared at the city, bathed in the brilliance of the flames. “So, what now?”

Ikai gestured towards the city. “Now we finish what we started.”

Chapter 35

Night had fallen over the battlefield. The surviving rebels had retreated to the river, taking the wounded, leaving behind them on the plain the thousands of their companions who had fallen in the fight. Hundreds of small fires illuminated the riverside; around them the Senoca tended to their wounded and tried to recover from the nightmare they had been through. The moans of pain from the dying intoned a litany to Girlai, Father Moon, who watched them from the sky with eyes filled with tears.

Around one of the fires, the Heroes and surviving leaders were eating and recovering their strength and cheer.

“How many?” Ikai asked.

Liriana sighed. “There are fifteen thousand left of the reinforcements Kyra brought, plus twenty thousand survivors. The rest are either wounded, crippled or dying.”

“And they’re afraid,” said Albana. “Now they know the horrors of war, they’re very much afraid.”

Ikai shook his head. “I can’t blame them. It was appalling.”

Kyra clenched her fist tightly.

“That’s exactly why we can’t give up now. Tens of thousands have sacrificed themselves. We have to fight to the end.”

“We’re with you,” Camptos said, and glanced towards Pasmal, who nodded. “We share your feelings. We’ve lost too many lives. We can’t give up now.”

“What about Rutus?” Liriana asked.

“Idana’s taking care of him,” said Romen, who was sitting beside her. “He’s badly wounded. I’m not sure he’ll survive.”

“And Maruk?” she asked uneasily.

“He’s gone for supplies with a hundred men. We need food and medicines: there are hundreds of wounded. He’ll be back at dawn with everything he can find in the villages around.”

Ikai’s gaze turned to the city in the background. Torches were burning on the battlements.

“It won’t be easy to take the city. Those walls are a massive obstacle…”

“We’ll do it,” Kyra said with conviction. “Even if I have to bang my head on the walls to bring them down.”

Albana burst out laughing. “I’d gladly pay to see that! I really would!”

“Well, that head of yours is certainly stubborn enough to make a success of it!” Ikai said.

Kyra blushed, and they all laughed. And for a moment that nightmarish day became a little less hard to bear in their saddened hearts.

Ikai was looking thoughtful, and Liriana noticed this.

“What’s going on in that clever head of yours?” she asked.

“Well… we don’t have much time, we’re out of supplies, and there are a lot of mouths to feed here and tend to. Whereas they can hold out in the city – even in a long siege – much longer than we can out here.”

“True.”

“These are peasants, not warriors,” Albana said. “They won’t be able to last out a siege, they’ll want to go back to their own people. Even more so after what they’ve been through.”

Ikai nodded. “And nobody could blame them. Once again we’re faced with all or nothing. We’ve got to take the city, before our people start to despair… Liriana, what forces can Sesmok count on now?”

“Now then, let me think…We’ve got rid of the whole Guard: the ones in the capital, in the two formations at the gates, and the ones who controlled the counties, the two armies that came to capture us and that Kyra saved us from. That leaves him with… his personal guard: about two thousand men, but they’re the elite. Osvan and his Hunters: about a hundred and fifty men, very tough and skilled fighters, as you know perfectly well. And a hundred or so Enforcers who control the capital.”

“We can beat them! There aren’t so many of them!” Kyra said enthusiastically.

“The problem is,” Ikai said. they’re all very good fighters. And they have the advantage of their position”

“That’s right,” Albana said. “We could beat them in the open field, but with them on the battlements…”

“In fact it’s going to be extremely difficult to take the city,” said Liriana.

“And… the Gods,” said Pasmal. “Won’t they come to kill us? They must know about our rebellion…”

There was a silence. They were all thinking the same question, but dared not say it aloud.

Ikai glanced discreetly at his sister.

The message reached Kyra’s mind clearly. *They will not interfere. They would not stoop so low. They will let Sesmok and the Enforcers deal with it.*

Kyra turned her head and nodded towards Adamis, who remained sitting in the shadows behind her wrapped in his cloak. They had all noticed the presence of Kyra’s unusual bodyguard, but nobody dared ask about him.

“They won’t intervene. Sesmok is the one we need to worry about.”

“Then we have to take those walls,” Liriana said. “It’s the last hurdle. We’re so close to making our dream come true. I won’t allow this to foil us. I’ll take those walls, I swear, for Gedrel! For all those who’ve given their lives for freedom!”

Ikai nodded. “Get everything ready. Let’s take care of the wounded. We’ll attack in three days, when we’ve had time to recover.”

“Fine,” Liriana said. “Tomorrow I’ll take half the men with me to the forest, then we’ll begin our preparations.”

“Agreed,” Ikai said. Then he whispered in his sister’s ear: “Can we count on him?”

Kyra sighed. “He won’t take part. If he does, he’ll be doomed. He’s only here to protect me.”

“I understand that, but I have to ask you, there are too many lives at stake. Can we trust him? He won’t warn his people?”

“I vouch for him, with my life.”

“All right. Then no more needs to be said.”

“Thank you.”

Ikai smiled at his sister. He loved her and trusted her completely, and for some reason he knew he was not mistaken.

“Come closer, brother, there’s a lot I need to tell you and very little time.”

Ikai moved closer to her so nobody would be able to listen to their conversation.

While the others ate and chatted, Kyra told her brother in a whisper everything Adamis had told her and taught her about the Power.

“You mean to say… you can use…. it? Like Albana?”

Kyra showed him the disc. “Yes, through this. Although someday I’ll be able to do it without the disc. And not only me, you too.”

“Me? Don’t say that, I’m normal.”

“No, Ikai, you’re like me. We’re the children of the same parents, and there’s Power in our blood. Yours as well as mine.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Well, you need to accept it, and the sooner the better. We’re hybrids with Power. Something very unusual, like Albana. I can assure you it’s true. It’s taken me a long time to accept it, but I have, because it’s the truth.”

Ikai shook his head. He did not want to believe it. For him Power was synonymous with Gods, and therefore of evil.

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“No, I know you wouldn’t, Kyra, it’s not that …”

“You know what Mother told me. They fled the Eternal City. Father and Mother were hybrids, and that’s why we are too.”

“You said Father. I can’t believe…”

“He’s not the person you remember, Ikai. He’s not the Siul we adored. Now he’s a monster. A bloodthirsty monster born out of the experiments of the ruthless Gods. A soulless abomination who serves his masters blindly. He’s no longer Siul, he’s Oskas. He’d kill us without blinking an eye. Don’t be mistaken, Ikai. I’ve seen his true nature, and there’s nothing left of our father in him. Now he serves Asu like a faithful, rabid hunting dog. And he’d torture and kill us if his master snapped his fingers.”

Ikai was hurt and devastated by her words. He knew what she was telling him was the truth, but his heart refused to accept it. The memory of their father was engraved in his heart: engraved with love, respect and admiration.

Kyra took him by the wrist, turned his hand over and put the disc on his palm.

“Do you remember, when we were little we played a game to see who was braver?”

Ikai smiled, remembering those good times for a moment. “Yes… I remember.”

“Well, I dare you to make it flash.”

“Kyra, we’re not children any longer…”

“I know, but why don’t you try it, just for me? Or does it scare you?” She knew that phrase had always had an effect on him as a child.

Ikai shook his head. He knew what his sister was trying to do. He heaved a deep sigh and decided to go on with the game, just so that she would let him be.

“How do I do it?”

“Easy,” she lied. “Focus on the golden pip. You have to see it in your mind. Once you see it clearly in your head, you order it to flash.”

“That’s stupid. It’d be impossible for me to…”

“Shut up and do it, or I’ll torment you, cowardy custard.”

Ikai shook his head again, but did what his sister had asked him. Albana, who had been watching, sat down beside them. She smiled and winked at Kyra, who smiled back.

He tried, but without success. He tried a second and a third time, with the same result. But, something happened all the same: the pip was now engraved in his mind. He opened his eyes and shut them again and there it was, shining in his head. He tried to order it to flash, but to no avail.

“Can you see the pip?” Albana asked.

He nodded.

“But you can’t manage to make it do what you want it to?”

He nodded again.

“It takes time to master it. Your sister conveniently forgot to tell you that.”

“With that head of yours, I thought perhaps you’d grasp it straight away.”

Albana laughed. “It’s not about the head. It’s about Power. It doesn’t matter how intelligent or strong you are, the Power is ruled by its presence in the blood. The more Power in your blood, in the family, the more you’ll be able to use and control it, the more skills there’ll be that can be developed. But whatever the case, to be initiated in its use takes time and effort.”

Ikai arched his eyebrows and looked at his sister. “Time I don’t have and effort I don’t want to make.”

“All right,” Kyra said, giving in. “Still, I had to try.”

The second evening they gathered around the fire again. Liriana and Romen’s tired faces revealed that they had been working hard.

“How are the preparations going?” Ikai asked.

Liriana drank from the water-skin and replied breathlessly.

“Well. They’re working non-stop. We’ll be ready tomorrow, as you asked.”

“That’s good news.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to build a battering ram to try and bring down the city gates?” Liriana asked.

“Sure. That’s exactly what Sesmok expects us to do, so we won’t.”

“It’s what military logic would dictate…”

“You told me that, Liriana, and that’s why we can’t do it.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll have to think of something Sesmok won’t expect.”

Liriana smiled, and her turquoise eyes gleamed.

“Well, there’s no-one better than you for doing that.”

Ikai made a face. They were expecting far too much of him.

“The main problem is the city gates. They’re closely watched, and if we don’t manage to open them, storm in and sweep them away with our superior numbers… then we’ re lost.”

“I know the gate mechanism well,” Liriana said. “They can only be opened from inside, from the tower on the left beside the gates, by maneuvering the pulley system. The tower on the right has a second mechanism in case the first one fails.”

“Right, that’s clear. Unfortunately, we don’t have anybody on the inside, and we can’t enter without being seen either.”

“I can, though,” Albana said confidently.

They all turned to her. There was concern in Ikai’s eyes.

“It’s too risky,” he said.

Liriana nodded. “Ikai’s right, Sesmok will expect us to try something like that. It’ll be under surveillance.”

“I could do it,” Albana insisted. “I just need a convincing distraction. A very convincing one.”

Ikai did not like it one little bit. He knew Albana’s skills, but even so it was insane. And there was no way he was prepared to lose her. He could not.

“If you manage to get in,” Liriana said, “I can tell you how to cross the city without being caught.”

Ikai shook his head. “You’re taking too much of a risk,” he said.

“We’re all doing that.”

There was a moment of silence. Ikai and Albana stared at each other. The others watched without daring to intervene.

Albana had the last word. “It’s my decision. And I’ve already made it.”

Ikai had no choice but to yield. He could not forbid her, however much he wished he could.

“All right then,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You’d better come up with a good plan, brother,” Kyra said.

“Give me a day. I’ll come up with something.” He gave a deep sigh.

The gathering broke up, and they retired for the night. There was a long day ahead of them.

Ikai lay down beside Albana. He pulled her to him and held her in his arms. Gazing into her night-black eyes, he asked. “Why do you do it? This isn’t your fight. You’re a hybrid, born in the Eternal City.”

She gazed long into his eyes. “I’m doing it for them, and I’m doing it for you.”

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“Neither do I.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Ikai.”

A couple of hours before dawn, on the third day after the great battle, the rebel tide began to move in silence under cover of the night. The thousands of Senoca went forward carrying rudimentary ladders made out of wood and rope. But most of them carried long tree-trunks on their shoulders, a dozen men to a trunk. They came closer stealthily, walking slowly, careful not to trip. They were approaching the walls of the city in two groups: one coming from the east, the other simultaneously from the west. When they were three hundred paces from the wall they crouched and waited for the signal.

The city was sleeping. Albana was climbing up the north wall, clinging close to it, making use of her skills and training as a Shadow to avoid being seen by the watch. She concentrated and used her Power: a black flash ran through her body and it melted into the darkness. They would not see her as long as she made no sudden move. But they might hear her, so she took careful precautions.

When she reached the battlements she made out two guards close to her, with three more to the east. She would have to slip through without any

confrontation, or else they would realize something was afoot and give the alarm. One of the guards turned in her direction. He was less than three paces away from her. She swallowed and held her breath, flattening herself against the wall. The guard looked towards the south.

Now. From her belt she took out a black ball and threw it high over her head. At its highest point it split in two with a hollow crack. Immediately the guards turned round and looked up in search of the strange noise. But all they saw was darkness. Albana took advantage of the distraction. With a somersault, in silence, she reached the parapet. She calculated the distance to the stairs that went down inside, concentrated her Power and called upon the darkness. A shadow shrouded her, and she vanished into it, invisible to human eyes.

I've got to be quick. This skill uses too much Power, I won't be able to keep it up for long.

She went on carefully as far as the stone stairs, then made her way down into the city. But she had to stop. There was one last obstacle waiting for her: two guards at the foot of the stairs.

That snake Sesmok has got all his men on watch duty.

Luckily they had their backs to her. She went up to them shrouded in the darkness and called on her Power once more. From her hand emerged a thread of blue-black smoke. She directed it carefully, making it pass between their heads and then split in two. Before they could react, the thread of smoke seeped under their helmets and into their noses and mouths. Suddenly fearful, they tried to react, but it was too late. The soporific substance had already reached their lungs, and the two men lost consciousness. She took a step forward out of the darkness and held them from behind to stop them falling noisily on to the floor. She left them leaning against the wall, as if they were sleeping during their watch.

She came out into the northern part of the city, behind Sesmok's palace. Now she just had to cross the whole city to get to the gates.

Piece of cake, she thought, and smiled to herself.

Blending in with the night and with the shadows for allies, she reached a small square, and there in a corner, out of sight, she found what she was looking for. She bent and raised the trapdoor, then let herself drop inside.

The sewers at last. And now let's see if Liriana's underground map leads me to where I need to go.

The first light of dawn broke. The moment of truth had arrived. Ikai gave the order. The horns sounded to the east and west of the city, and the great Senoca tide rose up to take the walls. They broke into a run with savage yells. They ran with all their might, trying to reach the walls before they were knocked down by arrows and spears.

The alarm sounded along the entire wall. Sesmok's men hastened to defend the battlements. The officers shouted orders to their men to take up their formation. But just as Ikai had guessed, most of the forces were defending the gates, not the side walls. The officers ordered their men to turn, and all the available forces assembled on the ramparts to face the two Senoca tides. Thousands of arrows fell on the rebels bringing death to the brave men trying to reach the foot of the walls.

Ikai was watching the fray, Kyra beside him. Adamis was a little way behind them.

"They're going to slaughter them," said Kyra.

"I know. It's the price to pay for taking the city. There's no other way."

Kyra made an impatient noise.

"Let me go with them."

"No. I need you with me."

She closed her eyes and shook her head as the arrows fell like a shower of death upon the rebels. "I don't want to see it."

"The first ones have already reached the foot of the walls. They're starting to put the tree-trunks and ladders in place."

"I hope it works, or they'll be massacred."

"It will work. I've calculated it. The wall isn't high enough. Even in his worst nightmares Sesmok never imagined that one day his city would be under siege. It would need to be six feet taller to be impossible to climb. A mistake we're going to take advantage of."

The Senoca carried the tree-trunks to the wall and leaned them against it, right under the ramparts, at a slight angle. They wedged them against the ground: first one, then a second next to it. The trunks were thick enough to let the rebels climb up and reach the battlements. While the defenders launched arrows and spears at them, the Senoca began to assault the walls.

“It’s working!” Kyra cried delightedly.

Ikai gave a snort of relief.

“Now it’s our turn. Get ready.”

The deafening din of the battle barely allowed Albana to concentrate. The Senoca were reaching the battlements at several points, and the defending soldiers were running to repel them. Albana concentrated hard and peered out of the sewer at the tower on the left of the great city gates.

Liriana’s map has brought me to the exact place. I’ll have to thank her, I really will.

Crossing the entire city through the sewers had not been easy, but she had made it.

Two guards at the tower gate, and generalized chaos all along the battlements. It’s the right moment.

She climbed out the sewer, drew her black daggers and moved on towards the soldiers nonchalantly, as if there was nothing amiss.

The soldiers saw her coming. They exchanged indecisive glances, and the most experienced of the two raised his arm.

“Stop… where are…”

He was not able to finish the sentence. Albana’s arms lashed out simultaneously two steps away, and the daggers found their targets in the guards’ necks. They died without taking in what had happened. She retrieved her weapons and looked left and right: everything was chaos, yelling and confusion.

Perfect. They haven’t seen anything.

She took the keys from the veteran guard's belt and slipped inside. Then she hid both bodies in the tower.

"Who's there?" came a voice over her head in the tower's inner stairs.

More guards inside… I'll have to deal with them too.

A strange fog, heavy and white, had settled before the city gates. Ikai and Kyra advanced at a crouch under the white cloak.

"Are you sure they can't see us?" Ikai asked.

She gave him a triumphant look. "Positive."

"You'll have to explain to me how you managed to do that."

"Adamis's disc," she said. "The one you dislike so much." She gave him a wink.

At the foot of the tower, they waited.

A rope came down the wall slowly, like a snake. Brother and sister glanced at each other and nodded. They started to climb the rope to the tower, praying to Oxatsi not to be discovered. The fighting was so bloody on the eastern and western walls that all eyes were there, not on the great gates.

Albana greeted them with a roguish smile. "You're the slowest climbers I've ever seen in my life."

Ikai was ecstatic to see her in one piece. On the floor of the tower he found three dead soldiers.

"You've been busy," Kyra said, her eyes sparkling.

"They have this bad habit of leaving guards on watch in important places. I had to deal with them."

"So I can see," Ikai said, not without concern.

"When I asked you for a convincing distraction, I didn't expect it to be quite so good."

"If it surprised you, it'll have surprised Sesmok."

"You can be sure of that."

“I’d give anything to see his face twisted with rage right this moment.”

“What are we waiting for?” Kyra put in. “Let’s work the pulleys and get these gates open.”

“It’s not that easy,” said Ikai.

“We have to operate the secondary mechanism in the other tower as well,” Albana said.

“Right. so how do we do that?” Kyra asked.

“We need two people to work the pulleys on this side,” Ikai said.

“You two stay here and wait for my signal,” said Albana. “I’ll clear the other tower.”

Ikai was about to speak, but Albana glared at him in a way he knew very well. He relented.

“All right. At your signal.”

Kyra could not contain herself. Her hands were on the lever which operated the pulleys.

“Now?”

“No, not yet. If we do it too soon they’ll see it from the other tower and sound the alarm – apart from stopping us from opening the gates.”

“Damn, why does it all have to be so complicated?”

“I wish I knew, little sis.”

Suddenly they heard a muffled cry. Ikai, who had been watching the other tower closely, saw a guard tumble off into the fog.

“That’s the signal,” he said.

Brother and sister worked the levers with all their might. There was a tremendous creak, and the gates started to open.

“Come on, Kyra, give it all you’ve got.” Ikai said. “It’s now or never.”

They both leaned on the levers as hard as they could, and finally the two giant metal gates opened wide.

Panting with the effort, Ikai saw Liriana coming in through the gates with five thousand men who had been waiting for that moment.

“We did it!” Kyra cried. “The city will be ours!”

The horns blared: first south, in front of the gates, then east, and a little later west. The Senoca retreated from the walls, soaked in blood, pursued by arrows. The defending soldiers, taken by surprise by this sudden retreat, awaited new orders.

And all of a sudden, the Senoca appeared from under the fog, pouring in through the gates of the city as if it were a broken and overflowing dam. The blue tide flooded the streets, and chaos took over Osaen. Liriana led her men to the battlements, and there they fought Sesmok's elite guard and the Hunters. The fighting was brutal, for the enemy's skill with weapons was superb. As they entered, the rebels headed to the top of the ramparts, where the fighting was centered. Liriana and Albana led the rebels on the eastern battlement, Ikai and Kyra on the western. Senoca blood drenched the parapets and battlements, but gradually the rebel numbers, together with their courage and heart, imposed themselves. Like a high tide covering a beach, inexorably, they went on taking the battlements until the last soldiers and Hunters had no other option but to surrender.

"Throw down your weapons!" Liriana ordered them.

The last officers surrendered and threw their weapons off the walls.

"They must be respected," Liriana told her people, to avoid a massacre. "Nobody is to kill them."

Kyra and Ikai secured their side of the wall and took the prisoners below. They went on to the great square of the city, where the gigantic monolith rose to the sky. When they arrived they found Sesmok, together with Osvan and Torkem, on the platform at the foot of the artifact of the Gods. On the steps leading up to them, the ones where Solma had lost her life, a hundred Enforcers were gathered.

"There's that bastard! He's ours now!" cried Kyra.

"Stop!" Ikai said to his people, and the Senoca came to a halt at the entrance to the square.

"Let's go get him!" said Kyra. "Let's tear his rotten heart out!"

"Let's wait for the others," said Ikai, with his eyes fixed on Sesmok. Hatred was eating him up within, but his cool head remained in control.

Liriana and Albana arrived with the remaining surviving forces and joined the two of them. Ikai saw that they had lost almost half of their people. But in the eyes of the men and women who had survived he could

see the spark of hope; freedom was within reach. All they had to do was clench their fists and crush the Regent and his minions.

Liriana's eyes were on Sesmok. "At last!" she said. "At last we've reached freedom! Gedrel's dream, our dream, is fulfilled today."

"What's he up to?" Albana asked herself aloud, distrustfully.

"Negotiating terms of surrender?" Liriana suggested.

"We're not going to negotiate anything," said Kyra. "I'm going to gut him for all the Senoca blood he's shed. For the thousands of dead we've left on the way here."

Ikai was weighing up the situation, waiting for Sesmok to make his move.

And Sesmok spoke at last.

"What an unexpected surprise," he said, sounding amused. "I must admit I didn't expect you to get this far."

"We won't have any mercy on you!" Kyra cried. "Even if you surrender and beg on your knees!"

Sesmok laughed. Ikai did not like the situation at all. Sesmok did not seem defeated; he was not behaving as though he were.

"Surrender? Me? Why would I do such a foolish thing?"

"It's the only option you have left," Liriana said. "Surrender and beg for mercy."

"Ah, my dear rebels. I see you haven't learnt your lesson. I've repeated it ad nauseam, but you never listen. It's pointless to confront the Gods. Anyone who does will die. It's an invariable maxim."

"Today you'll be the one who dies!" Kyra snarled at him.

"On the contrary, little rebel, today all of you will die!" Sesmok said, and raised his arm. The Eyes-of-the-Gods on the stairs emitted a flash, and a sudden tremor was felt on the ground.

Kyra turned to Ikai. "What…. what's happening?"

He did not know, but he had an ominous feeling. Albana gave him an anguished look.

From behind the monolith came Oskas, commanding an army of Enforcers. They descended the stairs, thousands of them, their feet thudding

on the ground so it shook beneath their powerful bodies.

“By Oxatsi!” Liriana cried in horror.

“No! It’s impossible!”

Ikai watched the army of Enforcers take up its position before them. And as he looked, he knew who they were and where they had come from.

“They’re the prisoners from the Dungeons of Oblivion.”

“But they’re Enforcers!” Liriana said incredulously.

“This is what they’ve been doing in that place of horror for so long,” Ikai said. “Creating an army of Enforcers.”

Kyra understood. “The way they did with Urda…”

“Yes, but with all the prisoners.”

“We’re lost,” Liriana said. “There’s no way we can face up to a host like that!”

Ikai’s gaze lingered on Oskas, then on the three thousand Executors behind him.

“Yes. We’re lost.”

Chapter 36

Sesmok's lips shaped themselves into a smile as evil as the lust for power of the Golden Gods themselves. His eyes shone with the unmistakable gleam of triumph.

"You stupid slaves. Now you're going to learn your lesson once and for all. You're nothing but a bunch of miserable cockroaches. Now you'll pay with your lives for daring to rebel against me. You'll never free yourselves from slavery to the Gods, and you'll never defeat me. You're all going to die!"

Oskas went back to stand beside Sesmok, to watch the fateful end of the revolt.

"Kill them all! Not one remains alive," Sesmok ordered the Enforcers. "Such is the wish of the Gods."

The Eyes-of-the-Gods gave the order, a single and definite one: Death.

And with that the Senoca were sentenced.

The Executors moved against the rebels with firm, determined steps, with their lethal impassivity. Their spears were to the fore, their huge bodies rigid, bearing death with them.

Ikai had no time to come up with any ideas. He drew his weapons and faced the Executor who was on his way to kill him.

"To arms!" was all he could shout.

Kyra, Liriana and Albana followed suit.

Behind them a war cry was heard: "We'll die fighting!"

And from among the rebels came Honus, wielding a spear. He charged against the Executors as if he were a God of the Senoca.

"Follow me, brothers!" he shouted with all his might.

There was a moment of hesitation. The rebels knew it was impossible to defeat those creatures. Their minds, their fear, assured them it was not

possible, but their hearts longed to follow brave Honus' example. They knew all was lost, that they had just been condemned to death, but they would die with courage. They cried to the sky and followed Honus.

"For freedom! We'll die fighting! For Oxatsi!"

"Imbecile mob," was Sesmok's contemptuous comment.

"They're nothing but ignorant slaves," said the High Priest Torkem, "Unable to follow one simple creed: the will of the Gods, or else death."

The Lord Hunter Osvan spat to one side. "They'll all die, like the stupid rabble they are."

The two fronts clashed. But the clash was insanely unbalanced. Driven on by his valor and madness, Honus managed to kill two Executors. But as he confronted the third a spear caught him in the chest. This was followed by a second, which went through his back.

"Bastards!" he yelled. He fell to his knees, looked up at the sky and said: "Wait for me, Karm, I'm coming with you." An Executor stood in front of him and without a word pierced his heart.

Chaos took possession of the square. The rebels fought with the despair of those who know their fatal destiny is on its way to claim its due.

Ikai managed to wound the nearest Executor, but he did not seem to feel the stroke. Kyra defended herself like a lioness, but was retreating before another Executor. Liriana, in serious difficulty, fell backwards in the face of the pressure from two Enforcers. Albana, making use of one of her dark skills, attacked them from behind and managed to save Liriana at the last moment.

Kyra brought out the Disc of Power, concentrated and managed to raise the protective sphere around her.

"Now you'll see, you swine!" she yelled at them. Focusing on the two Executors coming towards her, she sent them flying through the air as if they were rag dolls. Ikai stared, wide-eyed.

"How…?" he muttered, but already another enemy was upon him.

Kyra stretched out her arm, cupped her hand and in her mind caught the Executor's aura. "Gotcha!" She closed her eyes tightly, concentrating even more intensely, and gave the order to the disc. She felt the tingling which

using the Power gave her, and the Executor was hurled backwards against his own men, carrying away a dozen of them with him.

Kyra helped her brother to his feet.

“It’s incredible, what you can do…”

“So now you don’t think it’s wrong to use the Power, do you?”

“Absolutely not.”

Suddenly a spear came straight for Kyra’s heart. Frightened, she tried to avoid it, and the spear buried itself in the protective sphere.

Phew!

“Ikai, get behind me!”

Her brother threw himself behind the translucent sphere.

Just then a dozen spears struck the barrier, and she took a step back. She was definitely frightened now. *They nearly broke through it!* She raised her eyes to see an Eye-of-the-God commanding a dozen Executors.

“Throw!” the Eye ordered.

The rest of the Executors threw their spears against Kyra. They struck the sphere, which under the heavy punishment was weakening. *It won’t hold much longer!* The last spear penetrated it and grazed her chest. *By Oxatsi! It nearly killed me!*

The Eye-of-the-God took out a disc and aimed it at her: “Die, Hybrid!” A discharge flew from the disc and struck the battered sphere, which burst into pieces.

Kyra was left defenseless. Ikai stepped forward and covered her body with his own. Twenty Executors came towards them determinedly, carrying half-moon knives. Kyra shut her eyes and concentrated, but she was only able to pick out the aura of six of them. She would not be able to handle them all; she was still not sufficiently master of the Power.

They were doomed.

And at that moment, when Kyra realized they were going to die with their throats cut, a voice sounded in her mind.

Take a step back, and take your brother with you.

Immediately she recognized Adamis’ voice. She grabbed Ikai’s arm and yanked him back. A white mist formed before them, and Adamis appeared

from it. He thrust himself between them and the Executors. He was wearing his hooded cloak, and the Enforcers did not recognize him.

“No…” murmured Kyra. She knew what he was about to do.

As the twenty Executors reached him, Adamis spoke a single word. There was a flash, and they were struck by a tremendous wave of energy. Another thirty were hurled back by the impact. The Eye in command stared at Adamis. He hesitated. And Adamis clenched his fist. The Eye’s neck broke and he fell dead. The Prince of Ether turned to Kyra.

I cannot let you die.

“You… you can’t interfere. If you do, you’ll condemn yourself before your people. You have to let us fight our battle. To the last consequences.”

You will die. You will all die.

Kyra took his hands in hers. “Listen to me, my love. If it comes to that, you must let me go. This is my destiny. This is my cause, and I’ll die for it if I have to. Just like everyone who’s fighting with me. Just like all the Senoca who’ve given their lives for freedom.”

No, I will not let you die.

“Don’t join in. If you do, your people will condemn you to death. Your father will come looking for you with an army of Gods and hand you over to the High Kings because of the dishonor you’ll have brought on your House. That’s what you told me. I can’t let you do that.”

The consequences do not matter to me. If I lose my life, so be it. But I will not let anything happen to you. Not now, not ever.

“Adamis…”

I love you, Kyra.

“I love you too, Adamis.

If you love me, let me do what my heart begs me to.

“I don’t want you to sacrifice yourself for me.”

This is my decision, and I have made it already.

“Adamis, no!”

The Prince of Ether began to walk toward the center of the square. His slim figure became something almost ethereal, surrounded by a mystical mist which moved with him. It appeared as if that being had one foot in this

world and the other in the one beyond. As he passed, the Enforcers were hurled through the air. They tried to pierce him with their spears, but they vanished into the mist around him. They attacked him with knives, but as they touched the mist they too vanished, never to be seen again.

Slowly the fighting died down. Everybody, Enforcers and rebels alike, watched the stranger shrouded in mist as he headed straight to the middle of the square.

“Kill him!” Sesmok cried, his face distorted by rage. “What are you waiting for?”

Adamis reached the center and raised his arms to the sky.

“Don’t do it!” Kyra begged him one last time.

But Adamis had already made his decision. He uttered words of Power, and the mist that surrounded him started to rise vertically, as if it formed the vortex of a great tornado. Everybody watched in amazement. The Eyes realized that it could only be a God who was doing this and were thrown into utter confusion, unable to decide whether to attack or not.

Adamis sighed. *For you, my love.*

He held out his arms to either side, and the upper vortex of the mist column began to descend. But it was not the same mist as before. At an order from its master it had turned lethal. It began to spread across the square as if it had a life of its own and were trying to take the place over. As it spread it enveloped each Enforcer, searching for his spirit, and when it found it, it devoured it along with the body. The Enforcers vanished, and with them their lives. Their armor, without bodies to support it, fell to the ground with a clank. In the blink of an eye, thousands of metal pieces fell as the Enforcers were utterly consumed, Each one of them.

A sepulchral silence fell on the square. The rebels looked on in amazement. Nobody moved, waiting for the mist to fade to find out what had happened. A few moments went by amid a tension which was almost palpable, while the mist slowly dissolved. The pieces of armor, spears, half-moon knives and the hateful helmets of the Enforcers were all that remained strewn on the ground. Not a body, not a soul alive.

Adamis had vanished into the mist.

Sesmok was staring, slack-jawed. “No! It’s not possible!”

He turned to Oskas. The master of shadows looked around the square and said: “The power of the Gods. There can be no doubt of it.”

“No! No!” Sesmok cried in terror, and fled to take refuge in his palace. Torkem, Osvan and their bodyguard followed him at once.

The rebels reacted.

“Victory! For Oxatsi! For freedom! Victory!”

The cheers rose to the sky. Red fists waved the air, blue faces were aglow with joy. They ran to take the square and its surroundings, shouting with all their might in uncontrollable joy.

“He did it,” Kyra said.

“We did it,” said Liriana. “Victory is ours!”

“Sesmok and his minions are getting away,” Ikai pointed out.

“And Oskas,” said Albana.

“Let’s put an end to this once and for all,” Kyra said.

“To the palace!” Ikai cried.

They went up the steps to the great monolith, and from there to the palace entrance. The last of Sesmok’s elite Guard were defending the doors. With them Ikai recognized the Hunters. They made up a wall of shields with the Hunters behind them, bows at the ready.

“Sesmok and Osvan must have ordered them to hold out right to the end,” Liriana guessed.

“If we come from the front,” Albana said, “they’ll wipe us out.”

Ikai looked at his sister. “Maybe with your Power…”

Kyra nodded and stepped forward. Three arrows headed for her heart at once, and she raised her protective sphere just in time. The impact was massive, and the sphere weakened. She took a couple more steps forward, but the line of soldiers was too far away to let her see their auras. Another four arrows reached her.

Damn! It’s not going to hold!

She had to retrace her steps, back to Ikai.

“They’re too far away for me to use my Power, and their bows have a longer range. If I go any closer they’ll riddle me, the bastards.”

Albana stepped in. “Follow me. I know another way in.”

As the group ran to the back of the palace, Ikai turned to look over his shoulder. The rebels had taken both square and monolith and were hurling themselves on Sesmok's last line of defense at the palace door.

"Death to the traitors! Justice for the dead!"

That was the last he heard amid the chaos of yelling and cheering.

Albana climbed to the top of the wall at the back of the palace with the ease of a spider. She let herself drop into the gardens and set about two guards who were on duty at the back door. The first died of a swift cut to the neck, the second with her dagger buried in one eye.

She opened the door with the dead guard's keys, and the others went in.

"Be careful. There'll be more guards inside."

They reached the columns and the rear portico and entered the gigantic and magnificent palace.

Kyra stared around at the great halls which opened up before her. "It's immense. How are we going to find that snake?"

"Let's divide and search on different levels," Liriana suggested.

"Right," Ikai said, although the idea did not entirely convince him. "But don't fight Sesmok one to one, any of you. He's a poisonous snake, and we don't know what surprises he's got prepared for us. Whoever finds him must wait for the others. Don't do anything rash, don't take risks. He's too dangerous."

The others nodded in agreement. They separated and began to search the palace.

Ikai shook his head. Sesmok and his people would not give up, and there is nothing more dangerous than a rabid wild animal, cornered.

Chapter 37

Ikai went up the white marble stairs, sword and dagger at the ready. He heard voices at the end of a luxurious corridor and went to investigate. To his surprise what he saw was not Sesmok but his right-hand man: Lord Hunter Osvan.

“Come on, hurry up,” he was ordering three of his men. “Put all the valuables in those sacks!”

Ikai watched the scene from the door. At the far end of the heavily decorated room were three huge chests filled with gold and jewels.

They’re emptying the chests before they make their escape, the cowards. I’m not going to allow that.

Rage rose inside him from his stomach to his throat, but he forced it back down. He moved forward into the doorway with his throwing dagger ready in his right hand.

“That doesn’t belong to you!”

The four of them spun round, and he recognized them at once. They were not mere Hunters. Three of them were Master Hunters.

For Girlai! I was too hasty. He swallowed. *They’ll be too much for me.*

“Look who’s here!” said Osvan. His stern face was twisted into an unpleasant grimace.

“It’s one of the Heroes,” said Master Hunter Kilef, of the First County. “Ikai, if I’m not mistaken.”

Osvan turned to the second man. “It’s him, isn’t it? I think you knew him quite well.”

“Yes, that’s him,” said Master Hunter Sejof.

Ikai was paralyzed as he recognized his old Master.

“Didn’t he leave you badly wounded in a forest after killing your pack?”

“Yes, and he stole my Hawk Eye.”

“Curious, the way life turns,” Osvan said. “Today fate serves you your revenge on a silver platter.”

“Your sister Kyra and I had an unpleasant encounter,” said the third man: Lonus, Master Hunter of the Fifth County. “You have no idea how happy it makes me to know I can repay the debt.”

Ikai tensed. He had stepped into a hornets’ nest, and now they were going to make him pay with his life.

Osvan aimed his sword at him. “Sejof, kill this treacherous scum. Cut his throat. It’s the least he deserves for the dishonor he caused you. Which he caused us all.”

Sejof nodded. He drew sword and knife, and with his black eyes fixed on Ikai’s he moved in to the kill.

Ikai brought up his sword. “Master… don’t…”

But Sejof was already no more than a pace away. Behind his broad back Osvan and the two other Masters stood watching with pleasure.

The look Ikai gave his Master was imploring. He did not want to fight him, did not wish to kill him. He knew he was a fair man: driven by the circumstances of his position, but deep down, an honest man.

“Master…”

Sejof’s sword flashed. Ikai did not take his eyes away from those of the Master. And he saw something in them which was not hatred, was not death, but a warning. Sejof’s glance moved to Ikai’s dagger, then to his own, then back to Ikai’s eyes again. Then he winked at him and Ikai understood.

Sejof launched a devilishly swift stroke. Ikai did not move. The sword brushed his chest, but went wide. The three men, covered by Sejof’s body, could not see whether the thrust had been lethal or not, but they assumed it was, and relaxed. Sejof withdrew his sword and turned to them. As he completed his turn he threw his dagger at Kilef’s right eye.

“What –” said Lonus, and raised his arm. Ikai’s dagger caught him in the neck.

The two Master Hunters fell to the floor, dead.

“Treason! You cursed traitors!” cried Osvan.

Sejof smiled at Ikai. “I’m delighted to see you. I hope you’ll forgive what happened … you’ve always been like a son to me. I’m sorry about the past, the situation… my family…”

“There’s nothing to forgive. Thank you for saving me today.”

“You pardoned my life. I owed you. I’m a man of honor, Hunter or not.”

“We can still escape through the tunnels,” Osvan said. “There’s still time. We can get away with all these riches. Don’t be fools. Think about it. Let’s grab all we can and get away from that rabble.”

Sejof looked inquisitively at Ikai. “Would you like to do the honors? Or shall I?”

Ikai eyed Osvan for a moment. He was fierce and skillful. He was trapped, and it was going to be a dangerous business. The most logical option occurred to him.

“We’ll both do it at the same time.”

Sejof nodded, and both of them attacked Osvan.

The combat was fierce. The three men were excellent fighters, expert swordsmen. The Lord Hunter defended himself skillfully, but he could not deal with both. He died run through by Ikai’s sword, not without having wounded Sejof first.

“Go, finish all that,” Sejof said to Ikai as he made a tourniquet for his arm.

“Once again, thank you, Master.”

“I’m no longer your Master, Ikai. Now you’re your own Master.”

“I’ll come back for you.”

Sejof nodded and waved him away.

Ikai left at a run.

Liriana reached the bedrooms upstairs. She knew this was the least likely place to find Sesmok at that particular moment, but she had to make sure. She went into several rooms until she came to the most luxurious. *This is Sesmok’s suite, I’m sure of it. It’s ridiculously overdone. But it’s deserted…. so, where is he? Where are you hiding, you traitor?* That viper

must be trying to escape somewhere on the ground floor. She went down the eastern stairs and ran to the far side in search of some way of reaching the cellars. *There has to be a staircase to the lower floors somewhere in this huge building.*

She passed two massive, ornamented doors and stopped. *Why are they closed?* She turned back and studied the double doors. This was a regal room. Careful not to make a sound, she opened one of the doors a crack, bent and peered inside. It was the Regent's throne hall. A movement caught her attention and she followed it with her eyes.

There he is, the bastard!

Sesmok and Torkem were beside the throne, and two elite officers were with them. They were carrying large saddlebags, each of them carrying four either slung over their shoulders or in their hands. They were ready to run away, taking with them part of the riches stolen from the people.

Liriana hesitated. Ikai had told them not to fight Sesmok on their own. *But he's going to get away! We won't get another chance.* She was still trying to decide what to do when she saw Romen appear at the front of the palace.

"Romen! Here!" she called in a whisper. But he did not see her and went on his way towards the western wing.

"Romen!" she whispered again, more loudly and urgently.

This time he did hear and stopped. He looked everywhere in confusion, but could not see her.

Liriana gestured. Finally he saw her and hurried over. In a whisper, she described the scene inside the room.

"We're going in. Ready?"

He nodded. They threw the doors wide and burst in.

"Hell!" cried Sesmok. Immediately they dropped the saddlebags and drew their swords. Torkem grasped a massive gold scepter with diamonds.

The two officers stepped forward and measured up to them.

"If I were you," Liriana said to them, "I'd drop those weapons and stay alive."

The two officers looked at each other.

"Kill her!" cried Sesmok.

Both officers fought well, with swordsmanship that was worthy of their training. But nothing would stop Liriana now that she was so close to reaching her dream. Romen was forced to retreat as his officer was more skillful and adept. Liriana on the other hand, driven on by pure strength and rage, disarmed her rival and killed him. She turned to Romen, who had fallen, then jumped onto the officer's back and brought him down. They rolled on the floor. The soldier tried to get to his feet, but a tremendous blow from the pommel of Liriana's sword knocked him unconscious. He fell to one side. She got up and helped Romen to his feet.

She raised her sword towards Sesmok. "Don't you dare move, or I'll run you through."

Sesmok smiled, but did not move.

"You don't really think you can stop me, do you, Liriana?" he said scornfully.

"How do you know who I am?"

"Oh I know everything about you, Captain Liriana. About your mentor Gedrel, and your senseless rebellion. About the Shelter, about the Heroes, about all of you."

"That's not possible," she said, totally confused.

"I've always known, and I've always been one step ahead of you."

"Whatever the facts may be, today the tables are turned."

"Do you really think so? This is only a minor complication. I'll get away" – he glanced at the passage in the wall – "and I'll come back with an even greater army of Enforcers. Perhaps even with the Gods themselves after what we witnessed today in the square. Or do you really believe the Gods will allow this revolt? You fool! Idiots, all of you! You'll all die for this, all of you!"

"You're not going anywhere!"

"Who's going to stop me. You?"

"If you or that lump of grease there take a single step, I'll skewer you."

Sesmok laughed, and Torkem grinned from ear to ear. Completely at ease. Liriana did not like this at all. *What's happening here?*

"Marcus, disarm her."

She was puzzled. There was nobody else there but her and Romen.

Romen put a knife to her neck.

“Drop your weapons, Liriana.”

“Romen? No, not you! No, no, no!”

Sesmok laughed heartily, full of self-satisfaction.

“You’ll always be one step behind me. Always.”

“Drop them,” Romen said, and pressed the dagger against her neck until blood appeared on the blade.

Liriana dropped her sword and dagger. “You’re my right hand, there’s nobody I trust more… the Shelter? All Gedrel’s plans and Ikai’s? Was it you? You were the informer? You betrayed us?”

“Marcus hasn’t betrayed anybody. Unlike you, he’s loyal to me. He always has been. I asked him to infiltrate the rebels, and he did. He’s been serving me faithfully since.”

“Why, Romen? Why?”

“His name is Marcus, not Romen, and he has powerful reasons.”

Romen gestured towards Sesmok. “He’s my blood, my family.”

Liriana could not believe it. How could she have been so blind? But she would never have suspected Romen, never.

“Marcus is my nephew, my sister’s son, of my own blood,” Sesmok said, beaming. “A young man with exceptional qualities, as you well know.”

“And Mother? And my sister?” Romen asked.

“They’re safe. I sent them north, to the First County, a long way from here.”

“Good. It’s time to get out of here. The Rebels are about to enter the palace, and the Heroes are already looking for you.”

“Right. Kill her, and let’s get out of here.”

“Romen, no… in the name of whatever you love most, no…”

“I’m sorry, Liriana … I’m truly sorry. I’d have preferred a different ending for you.”

“After all we’ve been through together, you can’t do this. I know you, you’re not a murderer. Your conscience can’t let you do this.”

“Don’t listen to her! Slit her throat!”

“If you kill me in cold blood, you won’t be able to live with yourself.”

“She’ll kill our whole family! She caused all this! She’s the enemy! Kill her!”

“Romen, no!”

Torkem came closer to them. “The Gods are on our side, not hers. She must die. She must pay for her sins, for rising against the divine.”

“I’m sorry, Liriana. My duty is to my own people.”

The dagger started to cut her throat. She felt the cut, the cold metal. *It’s the end.*

And Romen’s hand stopped.

“Noooooo!” Sesmok cried.

The grasping hand loosened and the dagger fell to the floor. Liriana spun round like lightning. Romen’s head was tilted backwards. A dagger, black as night, was buried to the hilt from the jaw to the top of the skull. Behind Romen she saw a shadow, and in its midst Albana’s face.

“Thank… you…” she stammered in amazement.

“Look out!” Albana cried in warning.

Liriana turned and saw Torkem coming for her with unusual speed, considering the size of his body. Before she could react he hit her with the scepter on the top of her head. The blow was sharp and brutal. She lost consciousness and fell to the floor.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Albana said.

Torkem took a step back and glanced at Sesmok. The Regent pressed a spring in the wall behind his throne, and part of the stone structure opened, revealing a secret passage. Torkem turned to escape. Albana’s dagger caught him in the back of his neck.

“You… bitch…” he muttered, an instant before he collapsed and died.

She threatened Sesmok with the other dagger. “If you try to reach the passage, you’ll end up like your dear friend that lump of lard over there.”

Sesmok left his sword on the throne and raised his hands in the air.

He smiled broadly. “Let’s talk,” he said. “Surely we can come to an agreement.”

“I doubt it.” She turned to the door. “In any case, it’s not my place to pass sentence on you.”

“Whose privilege is it?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” She tried to revive Liriana, but the blow had been a hard one. A deep gash was bleeding all over her face. Albana feared for her life. She had to help her.

She decided to take the risk and use her Power. She closed her eyes and whispered: “Ikai, Kyra, I need you,” and as she did, she breathed long and softly. Her breath became a thread of black mist that left the great hall and went in search of the siblings, carrying its mistress’s message.

Chapter 38

Ikai was on his way down the stairs when he saw his sister come in from the garden and ran to her.

“There’s no sign of Sesmok out there,” she said.

“He isn’t upstairs either.”

She pointed behind him. “What on earth is that?”

Her brother turned and saw the thread of mist approaching. Unsure about this strange sight, they tried to dodge it but were unable to; it seemed to be looking for them. The messenger breath went on until it finally reached them.

Ikai, Kyra, I need you.

“It’s Albana,” Ikai said.

“She’s calling us…”

“She needs us, let’s go.”

Kyra nodded decisively. “Let’s follow the thread to its origin.”

In the throne room, Sesmok gestured at the saddle bags loaded with gold and jewels.

“Are you sure we can’t come to some sort of agreement?”

Albana retrieved her dagger from Torkem’s body and turned an icy glance of disdain on him. “You’ve got nothing I want.”

He was still trying to find a way out. “We all have a price.”

“You can’t pay hers,” came a cavernous voice behind Albana.

She spun round to face Oskas, Master-Spy and leader of the Shadows.

“Master,” she said, and tensed from pure instinct.

“You shouldn’t have used your Power openly. Remember, we’re Shadows, and we must act as such. You never know who might be listening in the dark, as I was. Stealth and darkness are our allies. You’re my best pupil, you know the rules well. You shouldn’t have broken them. That’s what allowed me to find you.”

“I thought you’d have gone back to the Eternal City.”

“I haven’t finished my mission yet.”

Albana took a long look at her old master. His figure always impressed her: tall and strong, like a Warrior-God, with his reddish ochre skin, his swollen veins, equally red, and the Helmet of Oblivion which covered his face.

“What’s the first rule of the law of the Shadows?” he asked. His worn-out voice echoed under the sinister helmet.

“We serve the House of Aureb.”

“What’s the second law?”

“We serve in secrecy.”

“And the third law?”

“The past doesn’t exist.”

“Good. I see you remember who you are.”

“I’m no longer a Shadow, Master. I gave it up.”

“Giving up isn’t an option, you know that. Only death can free you from your duty.”

“I never chose to be who I was.”

“True. I found you and trained you. But you’re a Shadow, and so you will be until you die. There’s no giving it up, there’s no forgiveness.”

“That’s right, kill her!” shouted Sesmok in fury.

“Shut up, little man,” Oskas replied with such vehemence that Sesmok flinched. “This doesn’t concern you.”

He turned back to Albana. “You,” he went on, jabbing his finger at her, “are an anomaly, just like me, a very special anomaly. That’s why I rescued you, and that’s why I’m giving you this last chance. Go back to being a Shadow, and your offense will be forgiven. Refuse, and you’ll die.”

Albana sighed. “If I agree, then we leave now, straight away?”

“Not yet. I still have one little detail to sort out.”

“The siblings…” she said. She was beginning to understand what he was after.

“Exactly, my young Shadow. He must choose his destiny, just as you must choose yours. She has to come with me. Lord Asu has ordered it so.”

“That’s why you’re still here.”

“That’s right. And as you’ve called them, they’ll soon be here. We’ll have them and we’ll be able to go back.”

Albana clutched her two daggers tightly. *What a mistake! I’ve called them into a trap! I can’t let him kill Ikai and take Kyra to that heartless creature. Never! I’d rather die first. There’s only one way out. I won’t let anything happen to them, not as long as I can stop it.*

“I have to reject your offer, Master. I’m not going to hand them over.”

“You disappoint me. I had high hopes for you. But if you want to die, I’ll grant you your wish.”

Before Oskas could see the move coming, Albana attacked with astonishing speed. Her daggers searched for his heart, but he moved with a swiftness surprising for his size. The master drew his daggers, and the murderous edges of the four weapons met with a flash of sparks at each stroke. Albana moved with the agility and skill of a black panther, but Oskas seemed to guess every movement and blocked his pupil’s blows and thrusts. Using her Power, she took an inhuman leap and fell on to Oskas’ neck, her daggers aiming at his jugular. Oskas leapt upwards and kicked her in the chest from midair.

“Ouch!” she groaned as she was thrown backwards. She hit a column awkwardly and fell to the floor. With difficulty, she managed to get to her feet. Oskas used his Power to propel himself forward so fast all her eye caught was a blurred shadow. His daggers searched for his pupil’s heart. In a reflex movement she managed to block the first of them, but all she could manage to do with the second one was deflect it. It drove into her side.

She cried out in pain, rolled to one side and dodged two strokes to her neck.

Oskas emitted a black flash, and a shadow enveloped him. In the blink of an eye, he disappeared. The shadow moved and reappeared in front of her, covering the space between them in an instant. She knew what would

happen next, and readied herself. Oskas' powerful body loomed out of the dark with his daggers in front of him aiming at her neck. She crouched and slashed twice at his legs. The darkness behind him vanished, leaving his body totally visible. But her thrusts had already found their mark.

"Well done," he said. Then – as if the wounds did not affect him at all – he kicked her in the face. She was thrown backwards and crashed into the fountain in the middle of the room. Half unconscious, dizzy, she used her Power and hid. Oskas lunged at her, but met only a black mist and her blood in the water.

"Hiding in the shadows won't do you any good. I'll find you." The Helmet of Oblivion flashed and projected a white light, like that of the Eye of the Eyes-of-the-Gods. Oskas scanned the whole room with it.

Albana was trying to recover behind one of the columns. Fear was working in her. *He's too strong. He's not human. And his Power's greater than mine. I won't be able to defeat him.* She breathed in deeply to clear her mind. *If he catches me I'm dead. I need to hide and strike from the shadows. It's all I can do. If I come out he'll kill me.*

"Are you going to die for them?" he asked. "Do they really deserve the sacrifice of your life?"

Albana considered it. *I love Ikai with all my heart, and I'd give my life for him gladly.* She felt a vibration in the darkness around her, and instantly the beam from the Helmet of Oblivion reached her. *He's found me!* She rolled to one side, and an instant later Oskas' two daggers struck the column smeared with her blood. She used her Power to disappear. Oskas was ready for this move and reached her with the beam from his helmet. She somersaulted backwards out of its reach. Oskas hurled himself at her with both feet forward and all the momentum of his body behind him. The blow was brutal. She was thrown back against a column. She tried to protect herself, but was unable to. With a hollow sound her body crashed into the cold rock and fell to the floor. She tried to rise, but instead fell back and lost consciousness.

"Albana! No!" Ikai cried from the door, with Kyra behind him.

Oskas turned to the siblings. "If you hand yourself over," he said to Kyra with icy coldness, "I'll let him live." He pointed his dagger at Ikai. It was smeared with Albana's blood.

“Albana!” Ikai cried again, but she could not hear him.

Sesmok took advantage of the moment. He grabbed several saddle bags and fled down the passage like a weasel, without a backward glance.

Kyra, her eyes blazing with fury, watched what was going on but neither moved nor replied to Oskas. She was waiting to see what her brother would do.

Ikai pointed his sword at Oskas. “What do you want with my sister?”

“I must take her to Lord Asu, and I’m always as good as my word.” He pointed at Kyra and paused. “Whatever happens to your brother is in your hands.”

What does this despicable God want of me?” she said, to gain time.

“My lord and master’s interest in you is none of my concern. I carry out his orders, and my orders are to bring you to him. What His Highness has in mind for you only he can say.”

She glanced over her shoulder in search of help.

“If you’re looking for Prince Adamis, I’m afraid that at this moment he’s facing his own problems. I’ve informed Lord Asu of his interference. My lord and master was very pleased with the information I provided for him. At this moment the High Kings are demanding Adamis’s head. They’ll send someone at once to stop him from interfering again. This Boundary belongs to the House of Water, and they won’t forgive such an offense.”

“You’re disgusting!” she spat at him. “You’re a loathsome creature!”

“And yet we’re of the same blood.”

“You’re nothing to do with me, you monster out of the abyss!”

Ikai looked at the battered bodies of Liriana and Albana and knew he had to act urgently before they bled to death. He had no choice.

“I’ll deal with it,” he whispered to Kyra, and attacked Oskas. He thrust his sword savagely at his neck, but the Master Spy blocked it with both daggers. Ikai tried to knife him with his dagger, but Oskas gave him a tremendous kick which reached him in the stomach, he bent over in pain. The Master Shadow moved forward, his lethal daggers at the ready.

“It’s a pity things have to end this way.”

Kyra could not hold herself back when she saw her brother in deadly danger. She lashed out her arm with all the rage which had built up inside

her, and her throwing dagger flew straight at the Helmet of Oblivion. Oskas did not see it coming. The throw was so powerful that when it hit the Helmet, his head whipped back. The helmet cracked with a clang, the polished surface broke like a mirror and several pieces fell to the floor. But the dagger could not penetrate it.

Ikai recovered from the kick. Seeing Oskas swaying as he held the front of the sinister helmet, he seized the advantage his sister had given him and attacked again. He went for Oskas' legs, which were already bleeding. Before the dark hybrid could stop him, Ikai slashed at both his legs. Oskas defended himself with his daggers, but Ikai rolled to one side out of his reach.

Oskas tried to take a step, but his legs failed him and he almost stumbled.

"Even crippled, I'll defeat you. You're no rivals for me. Setting yourselves up against the Gods is useless. Their Power is immeasurable. Only by serving them can we realize ourselves."

Ikai took a step toward him, but the Master of Shadows called upon his Power and vanished in an unnatural darkness.

"Show yourself, you coward!" cried Kyra.

Oskas emerged from the shadows behind Ikai, who was still trying to locate him. The daggers flashed, and two gashes appeared on Ikai's back forming a great X. He arched in agony and cried out.

"You shouldn't try to stand up to me, Ikai, it's pointless. I'm profoundly superior to you. My physical strength and my Power are much greater."

In desperation, Kyra used Adamis's disc. She concentrated and used the Power, found Oskas' aura, fixed it and gave the order. The Master Spy flew into the air, hit the far wall hard and fell to the floor with a dull blow.

"Impressive… Power, Ether," he muttered. He got to his feet, and Kyra used the Power on him once again. She sent him flying to the opposite wall, and the blow was hollow but tremendously powerful.

He got to his knees and spoke with difficulty. "I'm impressed, young Kyra. You have Power, and a lot of it. With the right time and learning, with the right master, that Power could come to be immense. Unfortunately you've offended a God, the most powerful of the Gods. That is leading you to a premature death, or else something worse."

“Then leave us free to go,” she said. “For the sake of what you once were, the person you once were.”

“Once I was a man, a man of principles, with dreams. A devoted man, with wife and children… a slave with a family, with hope. But I’m no longer that man. The Gods made me see the truth of our existence. Those who don’t serve the Golden die as slaves. This rule is unalterable. We exist by their grace and glory, solely to serve them. To believe otherwise is a chimera, and leads only to suffering and death.”

“Isn’t there anything left in you of Siul, my father?”

Oskas straightened and stared at her. “That man died on a cold table during an Erudite-God’s experiments. For a long time that man fought, resisted, clung to the dream of going back to his family. But the experiments did not stop, and day after day of inhuman suffering corrupted not only his body but his soul. His mind was unable to bear the torture, and one day he lost his reason. Only pain and agony awaited him, day after day. He only wished to die, but that too was not granted to him. It would have been too easy an escape. In the end they broke his body, his soul and his mind. And from that inhuman torture I was born. Oskas was born. Stronger, more powerful, more intelligent. I serve my master, for the past is no more.”

“I don’t want to believe it. There has to be something of him left in you. A speck of his kindness, of his humanity.”

“That was all erased by the golden pip I bear embedded in my forehead. The Gods make me see the golden path. They make me follow it. Their will is sacred.”

“My father would never follow the Gods.”

Oskas pointed one of his daggers at her. “Don’t think I don’t remember the past, because they haven’t managed to erase it completely. Your father was captured by the Gods because of you. Or have you forgotten that?”

Kyra cringed at the memory of her terrible mistake and its consequences.

“Yes, you do remember. You couldn’t hold back that character of yours. What I am today, I owe to you. You who spoke to the Enforcers with your fiery tongue as a child. You who made me intervene to save your life. You who caused them to take me.”

Kyra felt such remorse, shame and pain she could barely stay on her feet. Her knees trembled, and tears flooded her eyes.

“Don’t listen to him,” Ikai said. “He’s not our father, he’s nothing but a monster who serves the Gods!” He was trying to make her react and not allow herself to be overcome by her feelings of guilt. He needed to gain time for his sister, so he attacked.

Oskas saw him approach, but even so, he kept his attention on Kyra. From his hand there issued a blackness in the shape of a ghostly figure which went swiftly for her. At the sight of it, she raised her protective sphere. The evil shadow tried to devour her but it could not penetrate the sphere.

“How much talent, how much Power… worthy of my blood…” said Oskas.

Ignoring his wounds, Ikai attacked. His sword went for the heart. Suddenly Oskas’ image blurred, as if it were no more than a reflection. The sword pierced it, but he was not there. It was a false image.

“Look out!” Kyra cried.

Oskas appeared a step to the left of the decoy image, and Ikai spun round. Oskas’ daggers flashed like lightning. Ikai dodged the first one, which was aimed at his neck, by a finger’s span. But with the second, aimed at his face, he was not fast enough. He felt an explosion of cold pain. The edge of the lethal weapon sliced deeply through half his face, from the right side of his forehead, diagonally between his eyes to the left side of his cheek.

“Noooooooo!” Kyra cried.

Ikai took a step back and fell to the floor. His hands were on his face. The pain was horrible, the wound appalling.

Oskas came to stand over him. “Join me, Ikai. I can feel your blood. It has Power, a Power you haven’t yet discovered.”

“Never!”

“Come with me, serve the Golden Gods and attain the Power that is yours by virtue of my blood.”

“I’d sooner die!”

“The Power cannot be denied in you. I can feel it. I can make you into someone Powerful, into someone who could rival the Gods.”

“I don’t want your bloody Power. I don’t want to become an aberration like you!”

Oskas seemed to be reconsidering. It was as though Ikai’s denial had had an effect on him in some way.

“If you don’t join me you’ll die, you know that.”

Kyra, in desperation, tried to use the disc’s Power on Oskas, but he countered by raising a wall of utter darkness between them. She could see nothing behind that wall. It was impossible for her to grasp his aura to attack him.

“If I must die, so be it,” Ikai said, staring into his eyes. His face was soaked in blood from the terrible wound.

Oskas readied his dagger to kill him. He held his gaze. In Ikai’s eyes he saw his own, identical: one blue, the other green. Then the blood. And he hesitated.

And at that moment of hesitation a silhouette leapt on to him.

It was Liriana, sword in hand.

There was a muffled moan and Liriana collapsed on Ikai. He held her in his arms and saw Oskas’ dagger embedded in her breast.

“Noooooooo!” he cried, beside himself.

Oskas looked at her, shaking his head. “She sacrificed herself trying to save you.”

Ikai took the dagger out of Liriana’s chest, but there was nothing to be done. She was dying.

“Murderer!” Kyra cried helplessly. With all her rage she used her Power again on Oskas’ wall, seeking to destroy it. The defense trembled and nearly fell at her attack. Oskas became aware of this, stretched out his hand, and used his Power to reinforce it.

Ikai, on his knees, saw his opportunity. With all his strength he stabbed Oskas in the groin with his own dagger.

Taken by surprise, Oskas took a couple of steps back, and without meaning to he passed the threshold of the darkness he had created.

At that moment Kyra was able to catch his aura. Without hesitation she locked him, and threw him against the lofty domed ceiling with all the strength and rage her Power allowed her to use. The blow was brutal. There was a sickening crack, as if his back had broken. Then she let him drop heavily to the floor. The impact was tremendous. He lay there motionless, with blood all around his body.

“Ikai!” Kyra ran to her brother.

She held his bloody face between her hands. “You’ll get better, you’ll live,” she said, with moist eyes and broken voice at the sight of her brother’s wounds.

“Liriana…” Ikai said, as he gathered her in his arms. The captain was dying.

A moment later the rebels reached them. They had managed to take the palace.

“Look for Idana and Maruk,” he said, “and tell them to come at once.”

Kyra stood up, retrieved her dagger and took a deep breath. “There’s still one thing to do. And it has to be done, for everybody’s sake.”

She stroked Ikai’s head, took her last farewell of Liriana, and went to the passage in the wall.

Chapter 39

Kyra went along the corridors with a single thought in her mind: *he's not getting away. This comes to an end here today, with his death. I'll find him and hand his head over to the people.*

Rage burnt inside her. It was almost completely dark in most of the passage, so that she was prevented from moving as fast as she would have liked. She used the disc's Power to give out flashes of light to help her see what was in front of her. The hidden corridor ended in an interminable spiral staircase which led her to what she guessed must be the cellars, although all she could see were rock walls. Below, the secret passage became a narrow tunnel. She guessed she was leaving the palace. The tunnel was made of earth, supported by wooden beams. *Where's it going to lead to? Never mind, I'll soon find out.*

A strong, unpleasant smell reached her and made her turn. Straight away she knew where she was going. *You won't escape, you swine!* Fury took over, and she clenched her fists so tightly she felt a cramp in them. The tunnel ended in a trapdoor which in his hurry Sesmok had left open. Kyra peered through. *The stables! Damn!* The smell was unmistakable.

She heard shouting. Noise of fighting. Six riders on their horses were fighting against a dozen rebels as they tried to make their escape. The rebels were being slaughtered. She looked around for Sesmok and saw him securing the saddlebags to a white stallion. Half a dozen rebels lay dead around him. *The swine!* Rage prevented her from swallowing.

She got to her feet, grasping her throwing dagger in her right hand and Adamis's disc in the left.

Sesmok mounted his horse, ready to escape.

Kyra came out into the open in front of the stables.

"It's time to bring this to an end," she said. The coolness in her own voice surprised her.

Sesmok turned to her. “Kill the bitch!” he ordered his riders.

Kyra breathed in deeply and managed to hold back the fury burning in her. *This is no time to let my rage out. It’s time to act coolly, the way Ikai would.*

The riders turned to her. They had finished with the rebels. The first two of them spurred their mounts.

Kyra concentrated. She raised her left hand with the disc in it and fixed the aura of both riders in her mind. *Up to the sky!* she ordered the disc. There was a golden flash and both riders flew straight into the sky. The other two horses reared, and she took advantage of that. She sent the first rider crashing against the stable wall, then dropped the second on the roof. He went through this and ended up on the ground. He did not get up.

“Kill her, quick!” Sesmok cried, beside himself with rage.

Kyra stayed calm. The last two riders charged. She did not have time to use the Power. She rolled to one side, dodging the swords that brushed her head in passing. While they turned their horses, she concentrated on the disc. She lifted both riders off their saddles and hurled them against each other in midair with all the strength the disc gave her. There was a horrible crunch, and they fell to the ground dead.

“Die!” shouted Sesmok. Taking advantage of the fact that her back was turned to him, he charged to stab her.

She spun around like lightning. She saw the treacherous attack and let all her fury out in a whiplash movement of her right arm.

Her dagger buried itself in Sesmok’s left eye as far as the hilt. There was so much force in the blow that his head was thrown all the way back and his sword missed her.

She saw him fall off his horse as it passed beside her. “It’s over!” she shouted.

Several rebels came running from the palace.

“Freedom!” shouted Kyra with her fist in the air.

“Freedom!” they cried in response.

“The Regent is dead. Victory is ours. Take him with you, so that everybody can see him. Proclaim it to the four winds. Let all the Senoca know of it.”

“Victory!” they shouted.

“Victory” she repeated, and fell on her knees.

In the throne hall, Ikai was looking into Liriana’s great turquoise eyes, trying to hold back his own tears. He was pressing with both hands on the chest wound to stop her from bleeding to death, even though he knew it was no use. There was a knot in his throat, as though a giant’s hands were trying to strangle him.

“Why did you do that?”

“I couldn’t … let you both… die…” she replied brokenly.

“We owe you our lives. It breaks my heart to see you like this, when it’s my fault.”

“It’s not... your fault… You would’ve done the same… without a second thought… I know you well…”

Ikai noticed the blood at the corner of her mouth and had to look away so as not to burst into tears.

“Stop… looking at… my legs…”

He took a deep breath. For a moment he felt as though they were back in the past, when they had first met.

“They’re too muscular,” he said, trying to smile.

“You’ve always… loved them… don’t deny it.”

He nodded, and a tear he could not hold back trickled down his cheek.

She stroked his cheek. “I want you to know… what happened between us… it did mean something to me…”

“You don’t need to say anything.”

“Let me… if things had been otherwise…”

“But they weren’t, and you did the right thing going back to him.”

“It’s to your credit… that you don’t hold it against me.”

“I could never do that.”

“Did it mean anything to you?”

He nodded. “You know it did.”

Liriana smiled, and a shiver ran through her body.

“Don’t talk, save your strength. Idana will arrive any moment now, and with her care you’ll get better.”

She coughed blood. “No… we both know I won’t… my life ends here.”

“You’re a fighter, you’ll come out of this one.”

“No… and that’s why… I need you to promise me something…”

“Whatever you want.”

“No… I want you to think about it… what I’m going to ask you involves responsibility …”

Ikai breathed deeply. The knot would not go away, and he felt a growing anxiety which gnawed at his chest like acid.

“So, what is it?”

“Gedrel isn’t here any longer … and when I’m gone too… there won’t be anyone to lead the people… Promise me you’ll guide them… be their leader. You’re the only one I trust … to bear that load…”

“You’ll get well and you’ll guide them.”

“Promise me…”

Ikai looked into those pleading eyes. He knew the responsibility was tremendous, that a mountain was about to fall on his shoulders and crush him. His cool, analytic mind told him not to accept, that it was a terrible choice which would consume his life. But his heart told him not to refuse: for her sake, for the sake of all the Senoca. He thought about it, decided and did not refuse.

“I promise. I’ll lead them.”

“Thank you… from the bottom of my heart…”

At that moment Idana and Maruk came in and saw the devastating scene.

“Liri!” cried Maruk, eyes wide and filled with horror. Ikai moved back and left her with him.

“Maruk… my sweet Maruk…

“By Oxatsi! What have they done to you?” he cried when he saw how severe the wound was.

Ikai stepped a few paces further away. Idana tried to help Liriana, but it was useless. The brave leader of the Senoca died in Maruk's arms.

When the Healer examined Ikai, her face shadowed.

"I'll have to suture your face and the rest of the cuts. It'll hurt, but if I don't you'll die."

"Don't worry. Do what you have to do, but first take a look at Albana."

"I won't be able to do much for your face…"

"That doesn't matter. Go and take care of Albana."

The room started to fill with rebels, who came to pay their respects in silence. With faces wet with tears and trembling voices they bade their leader goodbye, singing the ancient Ode to the Senoca Braves. They took their last farewell of her, wishing her final voyage down the river into the arms of Mother Sea to be one of peace and rest.

"Sail, Liriana, in the arms of Mother Sea, forever, on her eternal blue calm, with the winds of freedom caressing your face, toward an infinite joy."

Chapter 40

Kyra got to her feet, shaking her head. *We did it. I can't believe what we did. It's crazy, but we did it.* The cheers of the Senoca rose to the sky with uncontrollable joy. She breathed in deeply, and the air tasted like something new to her, something she had never felt before, something immensely sweet and pleasant: it tasted of freedom. Several groups of rebels passed before her, leaping and shouting with glee. All over the city the news of the victory spread like wildfire. Soon the good news would pass beyond the walls and spread throughout the six counties, through valleys, fields, and hills, reaching every Senoca, and they would know they were no longer slaves, that they had gained their freedom.

In the distance Kyra made out two figures. They seemed to be keeping on the sidelines of what was going on. They stood face to face, apparently talking, surrounded by a white mist. Thinking this was strange, she started in their direction. A few steps away she recognized one of the figures, and her heart leapt inside her. *It's Adamis! He's all right!* The other was also a God, though his features were hidden by a hooded cloak. By his size and build he was a God-Warrior, a champion most probably. His lips were not moving, but Kyra knew they were talking in the way the Gods did. She did not want to interfere, but curiosity ate at her. Then she remembered the bracelet Notaplo had given her. She thought twice: it was something she should not really do… but she had to know what was going on with Adamis, even more after what he had done for her… and she decided. She tapped the jewel twice and the conversation reached her mind.

My Lord… you must hand yourself over.

Are you sent by my father?

Yes, my Prince.

It has not taken him long to find out.

The Master Spy Oskas told Lord Asu what happened, and the House of Aureb immediately demanded your head.

The Prince nodded. *I have given them the excuse they needed. My father cannot refuse, I have interfered. If he should refuse, there would be war.*

The situation worsens by the moment, my Lord Prince. Lord Asu has demanded that the Five High Kings should be summoned at once.

Adamis was thoughtful. *It is most unfortunate that the Master of the Shadows was here. Although I suppose it was Asu who sent him in the first place, to ensure his plans were carried out. I have fallen into a trap. Now I see it. Asu's interest in Kyra was wider-reaching. He wanted to provoke me into making a mistake, and he has succeeded. And of course, his minion was in the right place at the right time.*

He registered it on a disc, my lord. There is no right of appeal.

I knew the risk I was taking. What is done is done. I have no regrets.

Kyra could not hold back her tears. *It was all my fault. Mine.*

You must come back with me at once.

I know, Teslo, but that I am unable to do…

Pardon my frankness, your Highness, but they are your father's orders. His Majesty the High King expects you to hand yourself over.

Kyra's heart froze.

And he has sent the Champion of the House of Eret to make sure I return with him?

My Prince, I owe my loyalty to my House, to my King…

Indeed. I am not judging you, Teslo, you owe your loyalty to the High King of the House of Eret, and that is as it should be. His orders come before mine.

Then will you come with me, my lord?

No, Teslo, I will stay here with them, Adamis said, and turned towards the cheering. As he did so he saw Kyra and smiled. His face radiated the happiness he felt at his love for her.

Is that your last word?

It is. I will not go.

In that case, Teslo said, *I must carry out the sentence*.

When he heard that, Adamis started to turn towards the Champion with a puzzled look.

The greenish, ethereal dagger took him in the stomach.

I am so sorry, my Prince.

Adamis felt an overwhelming pain. He tried to use his Power, but before he could manage to do so the pain exploded in his mind.

A dagger… for the murder… of kings…

Yes, my Prince, I regret it profoundly, Teslo said, and taking hold of Adamis, who was falling, bent double with pain, he laid him delicately on the ground.

Kyra cried out with all her being. They had torn her heart out.

Teslo showed Adamis the hidden disc he carried.

At your father's request, I have recorded the execution of the sentence. It will prevent a war among the Houses.

Adamis nodded between spasms.

Teslo saluted the Prince, and without a glance at Kyra vanished in the mist.

With her heart broken, unable to breathe, Kyra ran to Adamis and knelt beside him. She put his head on her lap. His skin, usually warm, was cold as ice and its golden sheen turning a putrid green around the deadly wound.

"Adamis!" she cried.

But he could no longer hear her.

"Noooooooo!" she cried to the sky, overwhelmed by an abysmal woe. "Noooooooo!"

A copper sun was beginning to set when Ikai and Idana found Kyra beside Adamis' body.

"What happened?" Ikai asked in confusion.

"They've killed him!" she said. Her eyes were full of tears, her pain unfathomable.

Her brother shook his head in bafflement. “It can’t be. He’s a God. Who could have done it? How?”

“His own people. They condemned him for helping me.”

Idana examined Adamis’s body. He was turning greener by the moment, the color spreading throughout his body as if it were corrupting all the organs. He did not seem to be breathing, nor did his heart seem to be beating. Idana was puzzled.

“I’m sorry… really sorry...” she said to Kyra, not knowing how to comfort her.

Kyra burst into tears of grief and rage. “They’ll pay with their hateful lives! I swear I’ll kill them all!”

“Isn’t there anything you could do?” Ikai asked Idana in a whisper while his sister gave in to her pain.

Idana shook her head slowly. “There’s nothing I’d like more. But he’s a God, and I don’t know the workings of his body. I can see the wound, yes, but I know nothing about the poison that’s corrupting his body.”

“Is he really dead?” Ikai asked, even more softly.

She lowered her eyes. “From my ignorance about the Gods, I should think so,”

“Gods or no Gods, I’ll gut them all!” Kyra cried to the heavens.

Ikai looked at Adamis. Seeing his sister’s pain, his own heart broke for her. This was something he could not protect her from, and he knew she was going through an agony of torture.

“I’m so sorry…” was all he could mutter under his breath.

The two of them looked on helplessly, wishing they had some way of taking away her tremendous pain, but knowing there was no way they could.

Lost in the moment, Ikai barely noticed the sting in his right forearm. But it grew in intensity: a cold pain, almost freezing, as if he had been cut with ice. He glanced at his arm and saw the tattoo of the tree. *I’d forgotten about this… the tree, over the wound.* He blinked hard, as the pain was becoming intolerable. A shiver ran down his spine. Suddenly the tattoo turned red and the tree seemed to waken, giving out a reddish mist that

slowly took the shape of a cloud in front of him. He had no doubt now. The mist spread, and when Idana noticed it she moved back in fear.

“Don’t touch the mist,” he warned her. “It might be poisonous.”

A figure appeared in the red mist, and he recognized her at once. Thin, wearing a brown robe with strange green runes, with her head covered by a hood. Her face was hidden by a mask in the shape of a tree. Unmistakable silver hair came down to her feet.

“The Witch of the Lake…”

The figure finally materialized fully in front of him.

“I see you remember me well, young tiger,” the Witch said in her cavernous voice. “I can barely recognize your face under that great scar, but I know your blood well.”

“Has the moment come?”

The Witch nodded. “When the tree of life awakens on your arm,” she reminded him, “then the moment will have arrived.”

He nodded.

“The time has come to pay the price specified in the deal we made.”

Idana and Kyra watched the Witch warily, not understanding what was going on.

Kyra got to her feet and wiped away her tears. “What price? What deal?” In the same movement she readied a dagger.

The Witch repeated the exact words of the pact: “*The price is this: One day I shall summon you, and that day you will leave everything and everyone and do whatever I command. Whatever I wish*.”

Ikai sighed heavily. “I’ll honor my part of the deal, since you did yours.”

“No way!” cried Kyra and threw her dagger at the Witch. It was aimed straight at her heart, but on impact it simply went through the figure as if it were smoke.

The Witch laughed darkly. “The tigress has guts.”

Ikai moved to put himself between the two of them. “Don’t hurt her. I’ll honor my word.”

“I’m not going to hurt your sister.”

Idana passed a branch through the image. “She’s not physically here,” she said.

“What do I have to do?” Ikai asked. He could not help his stomach tensing.

The Witch nodded. “It’s very simple. You will bring him,” and she pointed at Adamis with a leather-gloved hand.

There was a moment of silence while they all looked at the God’s body.

“Never!” Kyra cried. “You’re not going to lay your dirty hands on him!”

Ikai narrowed his eyes. He did not understand the request. “What do you want with him? He’s dead, and it won’t do you any good. Leave us to honor him and give him the funeral he deserves.”

“There are many things you know nothing about. There are many things you don’t understand. That’s my request. I’m not going to explain myself.”

“You won’t take him away!”

“Think well, young tigress, for your brother’s life is at stake.”

Her eyes filling with new tears, her fists clenched in rage, Kyra looked at her brother. Ikai said nothing. He left his fate in his sister’s hands. He would not cause her more pain. She had already suffered enough.

“I’m waiting for your answer,” the Witch said sharply. “The God, or your brother’s life.”

Kyra looked at both of them for a moment, took a deep breath and unclenched her fists.

“Take him with you. Let my brother live.”

The Witch nodded. “A good choice.” She turned to Ikai. “Bring him to me at once and your debt will be paid.”

“I’ll set out at dawn.”

The Witch waved her hand, and the mist began to fade.

“I want him intact.”

“Don’t worry.”

The mist vanished, and the Witch with it.

Ikai went to his sister’s side. “I’m so sorry…”

“It’s not your fault. Let me say goodbye, then you can take him.”

Ikai and Idana left Kyra alone with her woe. Her bitter weeping accompanied them until it was muffled by the singing and joyful cheers of the rebels.

Epilogue

The days which followed the taking of the capital and the fall of the Regent were days of glory and utter disbelief for the Senoca. Victory had made the people awaken from a thousand-year nightmare, and they were beginning to enjoy the sweet fresh scent of a feeling they had long forgotten: that of freedom.

Wide-eyed, hearts overflowing with joy and spirits soaring to the skies, they gave themselves over to that wonderful feeling that filled their battered souls with pure joy and hope. Hope for a better tomorrow for their children and the generations to come.

As for Sesmok's body, it was tied to the great Monolith and left for all to see, as a trophy of victory, as a call to all Senoca to awaken. The rebels took the Dungeons of Oblivion and freed those who were still imprisoned there. The voice of victory spread throughout the Six Counties with the speed of fire through dry fields in the summer. Soon the people of every farm, village and city were celebrating the wonderful news. Thousands of Senoca cheered, cried, shouted, leapt, wept, unable to contain their inexhaustible happiness.

The impossible victory of the rebels had brought them their longed-for freedom, but the cost had been terrible. Tens of thousands of Senoca had perished in the revolt: good, brave men and women who had given their lives for the freedom of their people. The sacrifice, the feat they had achieved, would never be forgotten, would remain in the hearts of the Senoca for all eternity. Many of the leaders had fallen, and the few who had managed to survive called a great ceremony to choose those who would guide them in the new era opening before them, to decide what course the people of the sea should follow. There was much to decide and still more to do in the future which was opening out before them. Word of the event's importance was sent out to each county. Each family would send a member to the great meeting so that every Senoca was represented there.

The ceremony would take place on the return of the Heroes, since Ikai had left to fulfill his promise to the Witch of the Lake, accompanied by Albana. Kyra had insisted on going with them, and no matter how much Ikai tried to dissuade her, it had been in vain. Albana advised her against it as well, trying to spare her friend the pain she would go through on the journey. But Kyra was not prepared to say goodbye to her beloved, and there was no way they could dissuade her. In the end Ikai had to yield, even though it broke his heart to see his sister so lost, and he would have given anything to spare her that unnecessary agony.

They took Adamis's body to the Witch's dwelling in the shadowy valley at the foot of the Dark Mountains. The Witch was waiting in the center of the lake. She greeted them, and did not seem very happy to see Kyra. She took the God's body, barely allowing Kyra her last farewell. After freeing Ikai from his obligation to her, she took her leave and vanished with Adamis in her arms, sinking into the silver depths of the lake. Kyra wept disconsolately as she yelled curses at the Golden.

Several days went by, but she did not seem to recover. There was no way she could be persuaded to leave the lakeshore, and she went on weeping and cursing. Ikai, feeling powerless to help his sister, did not want to leave her suffering there, but he was aware they had to get back as soon as possible for the good of the Senoca. The great ceremony awaited, and time was against them. Albana suspected the Gods would not be long in taking action, and that action would be catastrophic. They could not remain there suffering with Kyra, mourning the departed Adamis. In the end Ikai and Albana said goodbye to her and with great sadness went back to Osaen, where they were needed.

As soon as they arrived, the great meeting of unification was called. It took place in the main square in front of the Great Monolith. And for the first time the Regent was not presiding, although his dead body hung from the artifact of the Gods. Thousands of Senoca from the six counties filled the square, the surrounding streets and practically the whole city. They were all eager to know what would become of them now. Many found it hard to believe, most were hopeful, all were uneasy about the consequences the rebellion would bring, and most of all about the devastating punishment the Gods would surely impose on them. Fear and happiness mingled in their hearts, and none could get rid of the bittersweet taste in their throats.

The assembled people called for the Heroes, who came to stand under the Monolith honoring their wishes. Albana, Idana, Maruk and Ikai came before the Senoca, aware that every family was represented there. At once the people showered them with gratefulness and love. All chanted the names of the Seven, remembering the fallen Heroes too, honoring them all. When they heard thousands of throats cheering for Liriana and Urda, the survivors could not avoid being overwhelmed. Maruk burst into tears, and Idana comforted him with her own eyes full. Ikai's eyes looked for Albana's, and in her smile he found some ease. An ovation full of devotion and respect was paid to Gedrel, who from that day on would be known as the Father of the Rebellion, the one who dreamed it was possible to attain freedom when everybody else thought it impossible and who had given his life to achieve it. Thanks to him it had been done; they would no longer be slaves, and the Senoca would never forget that.

When the moment arrived for choosing their new leader, there was no hesitation among the Heroes or the people. The Heroes turned to Ikai and the people knelt before him, chanting his name to the skies. Thousands of throats cheered him, and a bitter, heavy feeling came over him, a mixture of honor and a sense of enormous responsibility. The lives of all those men and women would be in his hands, and for a moment he forgot to breathe. But he recovered, took a deep breath and called upon his *sang froid* and pragmatism. He asked the people to rise, but they did not do so until he accepted, which in a firm voice he did. He knew it would be the best choice for the Senoca at that moment, and he would fulfill it, however asphyxiating and burdensome the responsibility might be. When he spoke the words they all rose to their feet with joyful cheers. Albana gazed at him with pride, while he for his part did his best not to be overwhelmed by the whole business.

The first decision he made as the new leader of the Senoca was to create a council to help him. This would be made up of the four remaining Heroes and the leaders of the six counties. He asked them to choose new leaders for each county, but did not intervene, and nor did the other Heroes. He left the people to choose of their own free will, without interference. The debate and election did not take long, for born leaders and loyalties had been more than shown on the battlefield and during the horrors everyone had been through. And so the council was formed. Ikai was aware that nobody could rule alone, still less rule well. His past experience at the Shelter would now

prove invaluable to him. He remembered his mother beside him at the old council, her wise lessons, and begged Oxatsi to take good care of Solma in her eternal realm.

He called the council there and then. He wanted the people to witness how it would work, how decisions would be made in the future, with transparency, consensus, honor. One by one the six leaders of the counties went up the stairs to stand beside Ikai and the Heroes. And before all the Senoca gathered there, the first decisions were made. It was decreed that they would not pursue and kill the Hunters, Guards, Proxies and members of the nobility who had managed to survive and were now hiding as if they were Pariahs. They would be given the opportunity to lay down their weapons and join them. The same offer would be taken to the capitals of the six counties where the majority of Proxies and officers of the Guard had gone into hiding to avoid being lynched. The winners could not let themselves be carried away by hatred and spite. A new tomorrow in freedom and harmony could only be forged through forgiveness and coexistence. They were all Senoca, all children of Oxatsi.

This measure did not please everybody. Resentment was deeply rooted after too many years of submission, of privileged classes and slaves. The council let the discontented speak and listened to the protests of many gathered there. Those in favor of the measure also spoke and in the end, reluctantly, the people accepted the decision. The leaders of each county would take upon them to carry out the decree and ensure the peaceful surrender of the capitals, with no lynching.

Night fell over Osaen, and the meeting had to be suspended until the following day. The people did not go back to their villages, but made themselves comfortable and slept right there in the streets of the city, huddled against each other, longing for the new dawn to come soon so they could continue this deeply important meeting.

Come morning Ikai and the members of the council renewed the session. First they made sure there were blankets and food for everyone there. It was not difficult, since the stores of the Regent’s palace were full, as were the lesser palaces of the nobles, and supplies were shared out between all. As one of the first measures, they decreed a great funerary ceremony of farewell for all the fallen in the rebellion. This would take place by the great river, as tradition dictated, where the fallen leaders would

be sent downriver toward the bosom of Mother Oxatsi, and all the other brave Senoca who had died for freedom would burn in pyres. The supply of food and water was also guaranteed, as well as other urgent assistance for the neediest villages. And on that second day Ikai and the council made a decision which was both symbolic and (as it would turn out in the end) crucial. They decided to pull down the Great Monolith, a symbol of the power of the Gods and an arcane artifact hated by all.

On the dawn of the third day, with the square cleared, a thousand Senoca with ropes pulled on the monolith with all their might to topple it. Ikai and Albana watched the work from the palace entrance. For a moment it seemed it would be impossible to bring it down, however hard they pulled on the ropes; it would not yield. They called another thousand men to join in the effort. All of a sudden there was a hollow noise and the Monolith vibrated. A moment later, under the pressure of two thousand men pulling with all their might, the Great Monolith came down. With an ear-splitting crash it fell to the ground. To everyone’s surprise it broke into a thousand pieces, as if it were made of black glass and not solid marble. The crystal shards were scattered all over the square.

If that surprised them, what happened next stunned them. Suddenly the Enforcers who had survived began to appear, wandering lost and senseless through streets and fields. As if they were lunatics, they went hither and thither without direction or purpose, gazing at the sun, totally lost, unable to think or act, awaiting an order that never came. But something still stranger and more significant happened after the fall of the Monolith. The Boundary, the barrier of the Gods which had kept them prisoners, fell with the artifact. Ikai sent explorers to the six counties, and all reported back that the barrier did not exist anymore. It had vanished. The Senoca were at last fully free, since they were no longer trapped and could go out into the outside world. The news delighted Ikai and Albana, who were well aware it would have taken Maruk a lifetime to free all the Senoca from their Rings.

On the fifth day of the great meeting Ikai assembled the council, and for hours they debated the most important decision of all: whether to stay and rebuild or leave. Before his assembled people, he and the council finally reached a decision of enormous significance: they would leave those lands and find another beginning returning to Oxatsi the Mother Sea. The news was not received well by all. Many applauded and cheered, since they

wished to leave behind the land where they had suffered so much and find a new life far away from there. But others were not convinced, and protested loudly. A debate began. They did not want to leave, this was what they knew, this was where their homes, their farms, their means of subsistence were. To leave all that for the promise of a better life was deeply risky. Now they were free and had brought down the Regent. There would never be another Regent, nor Proxies or Guards, not even Enforcers. Why leave, then? Why not rebuild? After all, they had lived their whole lives there, and now those lives would once again be full.

Ikai stood back to let Albana address the people. Her words were harsh, cutting, but they had to be said. The Gods would never forgive that effrontery, they would punish them, and their wrath would be apocalyptic. Staying would mean waiting for the punishment of the Gods to come, as eventually it would; of that there could be no doubt. And when it did, it would leave nothing standing. They would destroy everything: cities ruined, fields laid waste, bodies burned, unparalleled death and destruction for all who stayed. Remaining there would not only be foolish, it would be suicide. Even though it was their land and the life they knew, if they did not leave they would be wiped out mercilessly. Albana made her point powerfully and added one last warning: time was running out, and if they did not leave at once, they would not be able to do it later on. The Golden Gods and their wrath would soon arrive.

Albana’s words had an impact among the Senoca, and the argument died down until the agreement to leave was practically unanimous. Ikai proclaimed the exodus, and the council ratified it. They would leave after the great funeral. The crowd dispersed and with hearts filled with hope the people went back to their families to prepare for the great migration. Ikai sent five expeditions to prepare the way, under orders to reach the very edge of the continent. From what Albana had told him, he knew this was not too far from where Mother Oxatsi was waiting for them.

That evening in the palace, as they were finishing the preparations for the great journey, the tattoo on Ikai’s arm suddenly turned red and the tree awoke, giving out a red mist.

“The Witch of the Lake,” Albana warned him as she caught sight of it.

The icy cold in his arm had already alerted him.

“What can she want now? Is it about Kyra? Is she all right?” Concern for his sister’s wellbeing tightened his stomach into a knot.

The mist gradually showed them an image. In it they could make out a figure lying down, with another beside it. At first Ikai could not recognize them, but after a few moments they became clearer and then turned completely real, as if they were in front of them and he could touch them with his hand. Except that he knew they were many leagues away.

“Kyra, are you all right?”

She gave him a wide smile. “I’m very well, brother.”

“But what’s happened? Where are you?”

When Albana spoke, her voice sounded strange. “Ikai… look who’s with her…”

Ikai was so happy to see Kyra that he had not noticed. He looked behind his sister and on a bed of white marble he saw Adamis stretched out. Ikai felt deeply sorry for her, she had still been unable to say a last goodbye to him, and then all of a sudden the God-Prince turned his head towards him.

He gave a start. “By Oxatsi!” he cried. Albana reached for her daggers.

“Take it easy!” said Kyra. “Everything’s all right! And more than that!”

Adamis smiled. “Forgive me if I do not get up, but my head is all I can move. The rest of my body is paralyzed, or rather dying.”

Ikai could not believe it. He glanced aside at Albana, and in her eyes he saw the same surprise.

“But… you were dead… the dagger… the color….”

“Yes, the *King Slayer.* It will eventually kill me. Most of my body is decaying with that poison. But thanks to the Witch I shall live a little more. She has managed to delay that ending. She is a very special woman… a wise one.”

“We owe his life to her,” Kyra said.

“Where are you?” Ikai asked.

“We’re in the Witch’s dwelling, under the lake. In reality it’s a very ancient underground temple of the Gods. The Witch” – she was silent for a moment and looked around her before she went on in a whisper – “is really one of them, and she wanted Adamis’ body. Not for anything evil, as we’d feared. Far from it. She wanted to save his life.”

“Why should she, if she’s one of them?”

“It’s complicated … the Witch is one of the Ancients, one of the leaders of the Children of Arutan, a group persecuted by the High Kings, a group that seek to bring them down. Hence her interest in Adamis. She wants to save him and is doing everything she can. For the moment she’s managed to give him back some life and delay his death. There’s hope.” She was unable to hide her joy, even though there was concern in her eyes.

Ikai considered this and was thoughtful. “So are you well? Are you safe?”

“Yes, don’t worry.” She kissed Adamis’s forehead tenderly. “I’m where I want to be, with the person I want to be with.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Albana said, seeing them kiss.

Kyra stroked Adamis’s face, which had lost its natural golden glow and looked gaunt. “I’m staying with him. I want to be at his side.”

“I have told her to go back with you,” Adamis said, “but she does not listen.”

“Be quiet, you disinherited Prince. Now you can’t give orders, only take them – and only from me.”

Ikai smiled. “It won’t be me she listens to!”

Kyra laughed. “Of course not!”

Ikai and Albana laughed with her, and Adamis smiled, unable to take his eyes off her.

“We’re going towards Mother Sea,” Ikai said.

“When Adamis is better, we’ll go in search of you” Kyra promised, and her confidence was such that Ikai did not dare doubt her.

He nodded. “Very well, little sis. See you by Mother Oxatsi’s side.”

“See you there, then!” She waved in farewell.

The mist began to fade, and with it Kyra and Adamis.

“She’s all right, and that’s what matters,” Ikai said.

Albana stroked his cheek. “Come with me,” she said, and offered him her hand. “Tonight we’ll forget about all the problems, all the responsibilities. Tonight there’s just you and me in this world, and we’ll love each other until our hearts spill over.”

And the great day arrived.

From the top of the hill Ikai looked out ahead. Behind him, in the valley, the whole Senoca people waited. Thousands of men, women and children, filled with hope, anxious to leave that land of slavery and suffering and reach Mother Sea to begin anew. Free, happy, without fear. They carried a few belongings and all the supplies they could, since the journey would be long and dangerous.

Ikai gazed into Albana's eyes.

"Are we going to make it?"

"I'm absolutely sure," she replied. There was a flash of determination in the look she gave him.

"I hope you're right."

"I am."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're guiding us."

Ikai kissed her and smiled. "Thank you. And I mean it."

Albana winked at him and took his hand. "Give the order, then."

Ikai turned to face his people, raised his arm and shouted:

"Let's go! On our way!"

And the Senoca people began the great exodus that would take them to Oxatsi, Mother Sea, where they would once again be the People of the Sea, where they would live a new future, in peace and freedom: a future full of hope.

---THE END BOOK 2---

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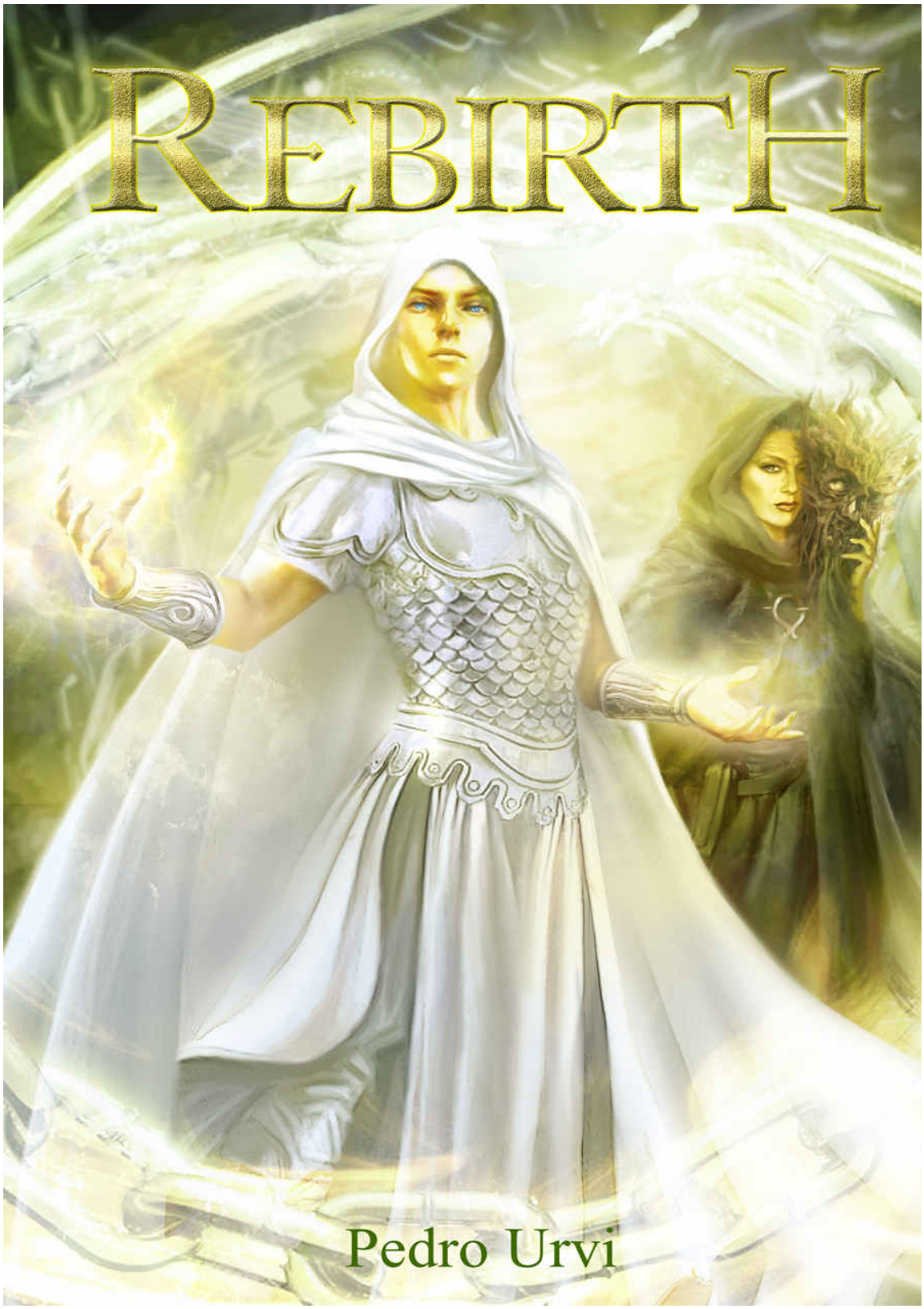
REBIRTH
Pedro Urvi

REBIRTH

Pedro Urvi

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To my father, my number one fan, always.

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Prologue

“Look out! A ship’s coming from the east!” called the sentinel on duty on the cliff-top.

When Ikai turned, he saw the vessel coming into the bay at a speed which surprised him. It was not a Senoca ship; this one was graceful, her sails very elaborate. On the prow a decoration like the head of a sea-serpent could be made out. It was vaguely familiar. Suddenly something inside him told him he needed to flee. And he saw it: a slender figure in rich blue silk clothing standing halfway down the ship, his uncovered face and arms revealing the golden hue of the Gods.

“It’s a Golden ship!” cried Albana, and the alarm in her voice turned their blood cold.

Ikai swallowed and tried to react. *It’s a ship of the Gods, we’re dead.*

“Run!” he shouted to his men with all the power of his lungs

The half-dozen Senoca explorers who were accompanying Ikai and Albana in their expedition ran toward the forest as if death itself were after them. The group reached the trees just as the ship was dropping anchor in the bay. They made their way into the dense vegetation and hid, panting heavily.

“Everybody keep still,” Albana ordered.

The Senoca did as they were told, and lay amid the undergrowth like corpses.

“Have they seen us?” Ikai asked her in a whisper.

From up in a tree, the brunette scanned the white sands of the beach.

“They’re landing.”

“Landing? Then they must’ve discovered us. How many are there?”

“The problem isn’t how many, Ikai my love. The problem is that…”

“I don’t understand you, sweetheart.”

“A God has landed. By his clothes and the insignia on the sails I guess he’s from the House of Aru.”

“A minor God sent on a mission to find us? That’s new, they’ve only sent Enforcers before.”

“No, it’s much worse than that. It’s a Lord-God. A Noble. And his bodyguards are with him: two giant Warrior-Gods and twenty or so Custodians.”

“It can’t be true! I never imagined they’d get their hands dirty coming for us themselves.”

“Me neither. Something’s going on in Alantres, something that concerns us. And there’s something else…”

“Something else?”

“They’ve unloaded two huge cages.”

“Oh, no…”

“Yes. Run! Follow me!” Albana cried. She leapt down from the tree and into the forest in a flash.

Ikai followed an instant later. An image was engraved on his retina: five massive beasts with bodies like wolves and eyes which flashed gold. They ran toward the east, chased by the pack of beasts which soon picked up their trail. They fled, leaping over brush and undergrowth, their legs driven on by the fear in their hearts.

“Run for your lives, and those of all the Senoca!” Ikai urged them.

The beasts entered the forest. They were far faster, and they had already detected them.

Albana glanced quickly behind her. “We won’t be able to shake them off, they’ve picked up our scent!”

Ikai pointed toward the southeast. “The Boundary’s very close, we’ve got to get to it and cross over. It’s our only chance!”

“If we don’t make it they’ll discover the New-Shelter!”

“We’ll make it!”

The beasts were gaining on them with each stride and in the blink of an eye were almost upon them. They came out of the forest and crossed an open area toward the cliffs.

“Straight ahead!” said Ikai. “Come on, we’re nearly there!”

“Quick, they’re right behind us!” shouted Albana.

She and Ikai reached the invisible barrier and crossed it at a run without feeling any adverse effects. They turned to watch the chase, anxiety gnawing at their chests. Five of the Senoca crossed after them like runaway horses. But the last one tripped and fell, two paces from the barrier.

“No!” Ikai yelled, and could only stare at him helplessly.

The first two beasts were almost on top of the unfortunate man.

“I’m going to get him!” Albana said.

“Don’t!” Ikai cried, but the brunette had made up her mind. She activated her Power and disappeared, to appear again beside the fallen man, who was struggling to his feet. She seized his arms and dragged him back with all her strength. The jaws of the first beast closed on the boot of the unfortunate Senoca, who screamed in pain. The second beast leapt for Albana, its jaws searching for her neck. With absolute poise, she gave a last tug and crossed the barrier. The beast’s fangs brushed her face. Albana and the explorer crossed the Boundary.

“By a hair’s breadth!” Ikai cried.

Albana got to her feet and watched the beasts. They were staring in her direction and roaring with rage, but in the end they shook their heads and retreated.

“They can’t see us or hear us behind the barrier,” Ikai told his group, who were scared to death.

“But they know we’re here,” Albana said. “Luckily the barrier repels the beasts. They’ll go, a few at a time.” She gestured at the pack of monstrous golden wolves which had gathered in front of them.

And she was not wrong. Amid roars and growls, upset but fearful, they moved back and stopped ten paces or so from the Boundary.

“You shouldn’t have taken a risk like that,” Ikai scolded her.

“If they’d caught him, they’d have found us all,” Albana replied, and pointed behind her.

Ikai turned to look at the New-Shelter of the Senoca. Around an immense white inlet and the adjacent coastline were thousands of tiny fishing-huts. Dotting the great blue of Mother Sea Oxatsi with white, the

fishing boats toiled under the breath of the winds. Further inland, toward the north, fields of crops and farms extended as far as the eye could see. At the top of the cliff, like a huge beacon, rose a monolith, translucent and protective, which hid the Senoca from the Golden Gods.

Ikai nodded. “You’re right.”

“They’ll soon be here.”

“We’d better be prepared for the worst. You,” he said to the men, “run to the New-Shelter and bring all the armed men you can find. Quickly!”

He knew that the reinforcements would not get there in time, but it was the most logical option, so he took it. He and Albana moved back and hid behind a boulder on the edge of the cliff.

“They’re here,” Albana warned him.

Ikai watched them as they approached, with the two Warrior-Gods in the lead and the Custodians surrounding the Lord-God. They walked as if they owned everything around them, and an incontestable aura of power enveloped them. When they reached the beasts they stopped. The Golden-Noble seemed to be displeased; his golden forehead was creased, his thin eyebrows arched. He gave an order to the Custodians, who goaded the beasts. But instead of approaching the barrier they ran in the opposite direction.

The Lord-God moved forward, a look of suspicion in his blue eyes. At once the two Warrior-Gods came to stand on each side, protecting him. He went on, toward the barrier, toward them. Ikai swallowed. *He can’t see us, he can’t detect us, the barrier was designed for this*, he said to himself, trying to calm his nerves. If they were discovered it would mean the end of the entire Senoca people. The Golden took one more step forward and stopped. He was two paces from the barrier, searching the horizon, and something seemed to have aroused his suspicions.

Ikai held his breath. *If he takes two more steps, that’s it, for all of us.*

The Lord-God looked up at the sky, then ahead of him, and shook his head with a grimace of disgust. He turned and left the way he had come, his escort with him.

Ikai blew out his breath so strongly he had to cover his mouth with both hands.

“That was close!” he said to Albana in a whisper, his heart beating like a drum.

“Yes, this time – but what about the next?”

Ikai looked at the New-Shelter for an instant, then at the backs of the disappearing Golden as they made their way deeper into the forest.

“You’re right. Sooner or later they’ll find us and we’ll all die.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll call a meeting of the Council, it’s time to face up to this.”

***

A week later, by torchlight under the great translucent monolith, the Council of the Senoca gathered. Around a rough round table inside a cloth tent, with the Shelter in the background and the tiny lights of the huts shining like an image of the night sky, the counselors took their seats.

Ikai presided as leader of the Senoca. On his right was Albana, on his left Idana. In front of him sat his sister Kyra, who had just arrived. Beside her, inseparably, sat Adamis, wrapped in a hooded cloak so as not to be recognized. Finally Maruk arrived and took the last seat.

Ikai spoke first: “Thank you all for coming. Especially you, Adamis. I know you’re not in the best of health …”

“It is important, I must be here,” said the Prince-God, who was suffering the grave consequences of his punishment for treason to the Golden.

“Let’s get straight to the point, he won’t be able to hold up for long,” Kyra said. She smiled tenderly at Adamis.

“Agreed,” Ikai replied. “Well, you all know what’s happened. The Gods are looking for us, and now, finally, they’ve come. This is very serious, they’ve sent a noble… They’re traveling all along the coast of the continent searching for us.”

“Sooner or later they’ll find us,” Albana put in.

Adamis intervened at this point. “There must be something afoot in Alantres for the Gods to have deigned to come searching for us in person. Something very serious.”

“A war of power among the Houses?” Albana asked.

“Very likely, yes. The House of Aru was weakened after the loss of their Boundary. They are allies of my father’s House, but he will not be able to support them for long without becoming weakened himself. Besides, they have to save face before the other Houses. That is why they must be searching for us.”

“But why now, more than a year after the escape?” Ikai asked.

“And why personally?” Kyra added. “Until now they’d only sent stupid Enforcers after us, and we managed to avoid them.”

Adamis bent his head and looked thoughtful. “I do not know. I shall have to find out what is going on. I cannot make contact with Notaplo, he almost lost his life helping me with the building of the monolith that hides us. I must be prudent.” He waved toward the arcane object, the source of the Power that created the protective Boundary.

“And the New-Shelter?” Idana asked anxiously.

Albana grimaced. “If the Gods have intensified the search…”

“We have to do something.” Maruk said. “We have to protect the people from those heartless bastards, after all they’ve been through…”

Ikai took a deep breath. “There’s only one choice, the one we were afraid of. We discussed it when we created this shelter.”

“Is there no other?” Idana asked, her face full of concern.

Ikai looked at Adamis, and the God shook his head.

“In that case, we’ll fight the Gods,” Ikai said.

“And defeat them,” Kyra added.

“But…” Maruk began.

“It’s them or us, there’s nothing else,” said Kyra. “You all know it.”

“I want you all to understand what this means,” Ikai said. “The sacrifice will be enormous, particularly for those around this table.”

Albana looked straight into his eyes. “We’re aware of that. It means separation, pain and death. In all probability not all of us will survive.”

Idana muffled a cry.

“If we’re to be successful we need to unite everyone,” said Ikai. “The Senoca won’t be able to manage it alone.”

“We’ll free the other Boundaries!” Kyra said, and raised her fist.

“All of us united as one people,” said Albana.

“And there is something else we will need,” said Adamis.

They all turned to him.

“We must divide the Houses. As long as the Gods are fighting among themselves we will have a chance. If they are united, we shall perish.”

Ikai nodded. “The decision must be unanimous. The task at hand is monumental and our lives are at stake. And not only our own, but those of all our people.”

There was a moment’s silence while all considered the decision they needed to make.

At last Ikai spoke. “All those prepared to fight the Gods, raise your fists.”

Kyra raised hers immediately. Adamis followed. Ikai and Albana raised theirs together. Maruk held back a moment, but in the end he raised his too.

“For Liriana, for all those fallen!” he said.

All eyes were on Idana. The apothecary had started to raise her hand, but had stopped. Nobody spoke; they let her make her decision without putting pressure on her. At last, with tears in her eyes, she raised her fist.

“It’s unanimous,” said Ikai. “So that’s agreed.”

“May Mother Oxatsi protect us!” said Idana.

And that evening the destiny of the Senoca, of mankind, was sealed.

Chapter 1

Ikai wiped the blood from his eyes with his forearm. He was in the middle of the battle on the wide fields of the highlands. When his sight cleared he found a sharp spearhead searching for his neck. Instinctively he tried to deflect it with his own sword, but knew he had become aware of the threat an instant too late. His sword would not complete its movement in time to save him.

I'm going to die a long way away from everyone, from Albana, Kyra, the Senoca, after all the sacrifices that have been made… he thought as he saw the spear on the point of reaching his jugular.

A round shield appeared before his face in a flash. The spear buried itself in the reinforced wood and never reached him. His sword completed its swing and hit the spear, which snapped. The shield moved back and he saw the Guard who was wielding the spear; the soldier let go of it and took a step back, unsheathing his sword as he did so. Another spear, hurled with tremendous strength, found its target in the Guard's chest, piercing his metal armor, and threw him backwards.

"Thanks," Ikai said. He turned to the man who had saved him. He was slightly taller and more strongly-built, with long, tangled brown hair. His skin was as white as milk, his jaw strong, and he was watching Ikai with intense green eyes. He was about Ikai's age, maybe three or four years older, and like everyone else in that peculiar Boundary was dressed in animal skins. On his back he wore a cape made from the pelt of an enormous bear, whose head he wore over his own. From afar, the first time Ikai had seen him, he had taken him for a real beast. He looked truly threatening and Ikai had realized this was no ruse, that man was an incredible fighter.

The warrior smiled calmly at him as though killing Guards were his daily work. Before them, the battle was turning bloodier.

“You don’t need to thank me, it’s my duty to protect you,” he said. He winked at him as he retrieved his spear from the dead Guard’s body.

“Thanks anyway, Burdin, you saved my life.”

“You take too many risks,” he said without looking at Ikai. “Lurama’ll be angry, and I’ll pay for it. She says we’ll never win without you.” Taking a step forward, he faced up to two other Guards who were coming toward him.

“And what do you think?” Ikai asked him as he fought another enemy on his left.

“What I think doesn’t matter. I follow our leader. She’s the Oldest Matriarch and makes the decisions. Besides, I’m a Bear-Warrior, my job isn’t to think, it’s to fight and kill in defense of my people.” As he said this, he was cutting the two enemies to pieces with remarkable strength and brutality.

Ikai finished off the Guard who was attacking him and scanned the battlefield. Thousands of slaves with clothes and capes of animal-pelts were fighting on the sloping fields, shouting like rabid animals, making their way to the plains where an army of Guards and Enforcers was maneuvering to get into a closed formation so as to face them. The numbers the rebels had managed to gather had astonished him. More than fifty thousand armed women and men were coming down from the hills, their pelt capes dotting the immense slopes of green grass which led steeply down to the great valley.

“I can’t stay put while you march into battle.”

“Lurama wants you safe, and safe you have to stay. Go back to the high forests.”

“But I have to lead them.”

“The Bear Heads will do that.” He pointed with his spear at a group of huge warriors with bear pelts like his own. “They’ll lead our people into battle.”

Ikai breathed deeply and considered the situation. The brave warriors had cut to pieces the first Regiments of the Guard who had tried to stop the attack. But now things would start to get complicated. In the valley below, the Guard and the Enforcers had already taken up their formation: the first in a rectangle, the second in a triangle. He knew well the damage those

military formations could cause among the inexperienced rebels. It was fresh in his memory, although a long time had passed since then. He remembered the thousands of Senoca who had fallen in his own Boundary.

“All right,” he agreed reluctantly. “Are you sure they know what to do?”

“They do, don’t worry.”

“They mustn’t be over-confident. We’ve conquered and liberated the cities of the county. There’s only this battle left before we take the capital.”

Burdin slapped his chest hard. “We’re the people of the Highlands, strong and proud, and we’ll give it everything we’ve got to reach freedom. Don’t worry, stranger, we’ll spill the blood of the enemy until not a single one of them’s left standing.” And after giving Ikai this assurance, he bellowed like a bear.

Ikai nodded. He believed Burdin. Those people were much wilder, rougher and more tribal than the Senoca. They were not as advanced in many ways, but in one they excelled: they were fiercely strong, and at that particular moment this quality gave them a chance. Even so, it would be really difficult to win, they needed to take every possible care.

“This is the most complicated part of the strategy, we’re staking everything on this. The men will need to be wary. They’ve practically handed us the counties so as to crush us here today.”

“They fled like scared rabbits then, and they’ll do the same again today,” Burdin said. He spat on the corpse of a Guard.

“Don’t be so sure,” said Ikai. “Pass on the order not to engage, just to strike and get away. Strike and get away!” he repeated, underlining the point.

Burdin gazed at the enemy formations in the valley. “If you’d let us charge against them with everything we have, we’d beat them.”

“Maybe, but the cost would be too high. Believe me, my people paid in blood. They paid very dearly. I don’t want that to happen again here.”

Burdin wrinkled his nose and snorted. It was plain that he did not agree. “Lurama says to follow your orders, and that’s what we’ll do.”

Ikai gave him a nod of respect. Then he looked behind him. The grass-covered hills rose toward the great forests. A morning mist covered them, and in his bones he felt the dampness of that land where it rained so much.

He could not get used to the constant showers, and the cold. But he had to admit that the beauty of that green landscape was unrivaled.

The horde of warriors was running down now, roaring to the heavens like an avalanche that would bury the enemy armies alive. Except that he knew the formations would hold, would break the avalanche.

“They’re nearly on us,” Burdin said.

“Is everything ready?”

“Just as you ordered.”

“Perfect. Then I’ll go up.”

“Will it work?” Burdin asked. He did not look as though he were wholly convinced.

Ikai looked around him. “The terrain’s right. But we need them to take the bait. Let’s hope they do…”

“And what if they don’t?”

“Then the rebellion will die here today, and we’ll die with it.”

“In that case, I’ll see to it that they take it. I’ll make sure personally. By Mother Earth, I will!”

Burdin saluted him with a parting nod and ran downhill to join the other rebels.

“Good luck,” Ikai said. He went up toward the mist-shrouded forests.

From that height the view was spectacular. He could see the whole battlefield, the plains, and on the horizon, the wall and towers of the capital. A dozen young Wolf Warriors joined him and remained with him, awaiting orders by the edge of the forest. He tried to make Burdin out, but it was impossible amid the rebel horde.

“First attack,” he told the young warriors.

The rebels charged against the enemy formations with the fury of a cyclone, howling and roaring like wild animals.

“They’re going to destroy them,” said the youngest, filled with joy at seeing his people’s daring and numbers. He could not be more than fifteen springs old, and his face was covered in freckles. His companions joined him, making comments full of optimism.

The sea of rebels broke against the stoical formations, and just as Ikai had foreseen even though it seemed impossible, they held. The lines did not break. The rebels crashed against a wall of metal and flesh and were rejected by shield and spear.

The boy saw the avalanche being driven back. “It’s impossible!” he said.

“I’m afraid it is. And now comes the worst part.”

The Guards and Enforcers began to wield death among the rebels, using their spears from the second line while the first stood up to the impact of the tough rebels. Each Guard or Enforcer who fell in the first line was replaced by another from the rear. The rebels hurled themselves against the first line, but crashed against a wall only to be run through and die.

“Come on then, Burdin…. make them back up…”

Chaos overcame the rebels. They attacked the front and the flanks of the enemy formations, trying to find a gap to allow them to make a wedge and break the lines. The howls in the roar of battle, the clash of metal on metal and the death cries rose to a crescendo. The whole valley was a tumult of dreadful din.

“Retreat, by Oxatsi, or we’re lost!”

Controlling that part-furious, part-terrified crowd in the midst of that horror and death was a very difficult task. The rebels went on attacking with neither order nor control, and for a moment it seemed to Ikai that everything was lost. But suddenly they began to retreat, moving away from the enemy and forming in front of them amid deafening shouts from Burdin and the Bear Heads. The rebels, imitating their enemy’s formations, gathered before them so that they covered the lower part of the hill.

“Are they moving back?” the boy asked Ikai. He sounded annoyed.

“No, they’re getting ready.”

The first three lines of rebels launched themselves at the enemy. The remainder waited. They struck fiercely, causing many casualties, then moved back immediately before the second enemy lines could knife them.

“Very good,” muttered Ikai.

The rebels repeated the action, striking and then immediately retreating, causing new casualties in the enemy formations.

“And now here comes the change,” said Ikai.

The young warriors were staring at him wide-eyed, hanging on his every word.

A new line of rebels formed before the Guard and the Enforcers. All of them carried spears. They advanced a few steps and threw their spears with all their might against the enemy, then immediately withdrew. Many Guards and Enforcers fell, pierced through. When they saw the rebels' new strategy, the Enforcers began to advance. Their triangle of death started to move toward the foot of the hill. The Guards followed in formation. Instead of attacking, the rebels began to withdraw uphill, in an orderly manner.

"Very good," Ikai said. "Keep on like that."

The Enforcers and Guards picked up speed. Their footsteps echoed as they began to climb the slope. The rebels were retreating, but not quickly enough, and men from the rear lines were killed. The pressure increased. The Enforcers moved uphill as if they were on the plain, such was the power of their huge bodies. The Guards began to fall behind. The rebels were now fleeing in confusion, climbing the hill as fast as they could. Many slipped on the wet grass or tripped among the crowd and lost their footing, others fell and rolled down. It was a disheartening sight.

"Come on, run!" Ikai shouted. "Get yourselves to safety!"

The rebels fled for their lives toward the forests.

Ikai turned to the young Wolf Warriors. "Ready? You know what you have to do?"

The men nodded with determination.

"Right. Take your places and wait for my signal."

The Enforcers had managed to reach the rearguard and were wreaking havoc. Soon the Guard would join them. A thousand men had stopped to face them so as to allow the others to escape. The confrontation took place half-way up the hill.

Ikai took a horn and blew a long note. First once, then a second time. The rebels reached the top of the hill and ran to hide in the mist. When the last men had gone into it, he blew the horn for a third and last, time.

It was the signal. The young warriors cut the holding ropes. He looked through the mist and managed to make out the six places where the trunks of enormous trees had been piled up, one on top of the other, to a height of twelve feet. Freed from the ropes, the trunks started to roll downhill. As

they rolled down, the gigantic trees gained momentum. Close to a thousand went rolling down the slopes amid a deafening uproar. The earth shook as though from an earthquake.

The Executors were the first to be hit. They had killed all the rebels who had opposed them and saw the threat looming toward them. The-Eye-Of-The-God at the head of the triangle tried to maneuver, but the trunks were coming at a hellish speed. The trees, five hand-spans wide, crushed them, running over the Enforcers like a giant rolling pin. The Guards ran for their lives in an attempt to reach the valley, but did not succeed. The trees caught up with them on the lower slope of the hill and pulverized them.

When the trees reached the valley and stopped at last, there was nothing left on the hill but dead bodies. A few were still alive, but Burdin and his men soon ended their misery.

Ikai snorted. *It worked.*

He was resting after the battle, lost in thought, sitting with his back against an old oak, looking at the barely visible moon amid the dark clouds which covered the sky. He wrapped himself in the bear cape he had been given and wished the camp fire could warm him more. The cold was beginning to be intense. He closed his eyes and thought of her. At once Albana's wild face and enigmatic eyes appeared in his mind. They were engraved with fire in his soul, and his feelings for her seemed to become more acute with distance. He remembered the happy times spent together when they had lived through the intense events that united them. He remembered the love they felt for each other, and how it had grown with each day of the fight for freedom, for the survival of their people.

Be careful my love, don't let anything bad happen to you. He sighed. He remembered the sadness of their parting, when each of them had left on their different missions. He remembered the weight of concern he carried every day in his heart because he had no idea whether Albana was all right. Or Kyra, or the others…

A voice reached him. "An excellent plan. We owe you our victory, Liberator."

Ikai came out of his reverie and looked up toward the voice. He recognized the woman immediately: Lurama, the leader of the People of the Highlands. She must have been about sixty, but her energy and intelligence made her look younger.

“It could have turned out badly. We were lucky…”

“I don’t believe in luck, I believe in wisdom, intelligence and the brave hearts of my people. Let me thank you on their behalf for what you’ve done for us.”

“You don’t have to, Lurama, I’m here to help you.”

“I’ll say it all the same. My people might be rough and cold, but we can recognize merit in those who deserve it.”

Ikai nodded in acknowledgement.

“Burdin told me we almost lost you today.”

“Luckily he was there to protect me. I believe I have you to thank for that.”

Lurama shook her head. Her face showed concern. “Don’t thank me, what you must do is not put yourself in danger. We can’t afford to lose you. Without you we won’t win, and my people will suffer the rage of the Gods. Those heartless Enforcers of theirs would bring such suffering that it would take us years to recover.”

The gentle scolding affected Ikai because it reminded him of his mother Solma’s. He gazed at Lurama’s pale face, where the wrinkles on her brow became more noticeable as she frowned. Her blue eyes, uncommon among those peoples where chestnut-brown was predominant, were marked by worry.

“You’re right, I’ll be more careful,” he said. He bent his head and stared at the fire.

“There’s too much at stake. I need you beside me to the end. The life of all my people is in our hands now, yours and mine, because it’s us they follow in search of freedom, and we can’t fail them, least of all now, when we’re so close to our goal.”

“We shan’t fail them. You have my word on that.”

“Your confidence comforts my spirit, Liberator.”

“You know I don’t like the title of liberator. *Ikai* is enough.”

“You’ve led us here: your knowledge of the Gods, of their Boundaries, of the Guards and Enforcers, of how they organize everything, and structure it … you’ve been invaluable. You’ve brought us the confidence we needed to rebel. You plan battles like a master general, far better than my warriors. For us you’re the Liberator who crossed the barrier of the Gods to free us from their yoke.”

“I’m nothing but a man, but all I know, everything I’ve seen and learnt, I put at your disposal to help you reach freedom.”

“I can see you’re not a common man, Liberator. This old woman can feel it inside her. As leader of my people at these critical times in our history, I’m grateful to you.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I came with a mission and I’ll see it through.”

Lurama nodded. “To free this Boundary, as you call it.”

“That’s right.”

“If you’ve already freed yours, as you told me, if your people live free of the tyranny of the Gods, why come to help us? Why risk your life? Shouldn’t you be with your loved ones? Shouldn’t you be enjoying freedom with them?”

“My people live free, but hidden and in fear of being found by the Gods. And sooner or later it’ll happen. Hiding isn’t the answer. I tried it in the past, and failed. We can’t hide, least of all from Gods who are eternal. They’ll find us, it’s just a matter of time. That’s why I’m here. To free the other Boundaries and unite Men in the fight against the Gods. That’s my mission.”

“A very ambitious and dangerous one.”

“I know, we all know. I’d give my right hand to be with my loved ones, but they share that vision just as I do. That’s why they’ve all accepted the mission.”

“And where are they now?”

“They’re in the other Boundaries, doing the same work as I am here.”

“Do you think they’ll manage to make the others rebel against the Gods?”

“I have to believe they will, because it’s the only way. We must unite. All the men and women. Together we’ll be able to defeat them.”

Lurama looked up at the moon, lost in thought.

“It’s one thing to rebel against the tyranny of your brothers and the Enforcers of the Gods, it’s quite another to unite and fight against the Gods themselves. Are you sure they’ll join us?”

Ikai heaved a deep sigh.

“That’s what I’m hoping, for the sake of all mankind.”

Chapter 2

Kyra gazed across the great plains from her piebald mount. The sun was shining intensely in a cloudless sky, and its rays turned the earth a soft red. Everything in that Boundary was reddish in color. The mountains, the plains, and the most surprising thing of all: its inhabitants. They were red as the fluid that would soon be shed on that land of steppes.

She turned to the two riders with her.

“Lone Wolf, how far are we from the Barrier of the Gods?”

The warrior put his hand to his eyes to shade them from the sun. He was young, very strong, and was acting as her personal bodyguard. His skin was dark red, his hair and eyes black, and he had a wild face which radiated fierceness. He gave the impression that he might jump on someone at any moment and cut their throat. His long hair was held back with a leather band around his forehead. He rode a piebald which he cared for as if it were his little brother.

He pointed to the west with his spear. “Two days,” he said.

“Is it all plains?”

“Yes.”

The warrior was a man of few words and very reserved. It was said that no one could defeat him in combat, either on foot or on horseback, as the scars he bore on his arms and side testified. This was a very strange Boundary; the warriors of the tribes were allowed to compete among themselves in fights to the death. Like a sport. Kyra could not understand why the Gods allowed this, still less why the tribes went along with it. Things were very different in that land. When she looked east, all she could make out was a huge herd of bison in the distance. She could now recognize them immediately, although she had never seen them before coming here, since those magnificent animals did not exist in the Senoca Boundary.

“Is there anywhere we can hide?”

“No.”

Kyra gave the warrior a pleading look to encourage him to elaborate a little, but he ignored her. She could not manage to get more than two words at a time out of him. Under that punishing sun, the warriors of the tribe wore only light armor made of bones and reinforced leather over chest and back, leaving sides and arms visible. He wore breeches and footwear of tanned animal leather. For some reason they did not use tunics in that Boundary, preferring leather. Compared with the Senoca, and in Kyra’s own view, the People of the Steppes were rather more primitive, as well as much wilder, at least in their customs and rituals.

“The mountains are more to the north,” Quiet Spirit intervened with a smile.

Kyra turned to her. The Medicine-Woman was slightly older than Kyra, maybe a couple of springs more, and of an extraordinary beauty. The soft red tone of her complexion, together with fine and wonderfully delicate features, was the envy of all the women in the tribe − including Kyra. There was not a man who did not notice her and hardly anybody who did not secretly desire her. But that was not the quality that stood out most in Kyra’s eyes: what she most appreciated in her was her inner peace. She seemed in constant harmony with earth, sky and spirits. Something which for Kyra, no matter how hard she tried – and she did – was unobtainable. *But I’ve improved a lot. I’m not half as impulsive as I used to be, or half as stubborn,* she thought, and smiled.

“Thank you, Spirit,” she replied to the Medicine Woman. “These plains of yours are beautiful and the coloring is spectacular, but without a point of reference, I get lost.”

“That’s normal, and it’s why you have me.”

“For that, and for a thousand other things. You’ve been helping me for so long I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“More than three years,” Spirit said, “since the spirits of good brought you from the other side of the barrier of the Gods.”

“It wasn’t the Spirits… I came of my own volition. Your beliefs are rather strange…”

“Stranger than believing in Mother Sea?”

Kyra laughed. “If you put it that way, you could be right.”

Spirit gave her a smile which filled Kyra with peace.

“Yes, how time passes…” she mused. It had cost her an eternity to win the trust of the tribe which had taken her in, and even more to begin to plant the seed of rebellion in those people who fought among themselves instead of against the Gods. She was doing it, little by little, and it would not be long now before she reached her goal. But it had taken her three long years of work, and of patience. Her brother Ikai had done better, which did not surprise her, and his work was further advanced. They only communicated every six months, very briefly, as they risked their communication being intercepted and traced to its origin, to themselves. The Gods had put a price on their heads and were hunting them without pause, Asu in particular, and the risks they ran were enormous. But Kyra did not care about the danger; she would simply keep going.

“What are you thinking, my friend?”

“That I haven’t gotten myself into too much trouble, thanks to you,” she told Spirit, with a wink.

“That’s what Lone Wolf is here for. To protect you from the dangers of the earth and the spirits.”

Kyra turned to the warrior.

“Wolf, how would you protect me from the spirits? I don’t think your muscles or your ability with the axe or the short sword or the spear will be much use against a spirit. Shouldn’t we look for one of your witch-men for that?”

The warrior looked at her in annoyance.

“*Lone* Wolf,” he emphasized with a baleful stare.

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t like me to call you just Wolf, but that’s exactly why I do it.” She smiled at the warrior, looking innocent.

Lone Wolf shook his head in resignation.

“It was a bad day when Chief Silver Eagle appointed me to protect you against all evil.”

“Oh my! He said more than three words!”

Spirit gave a giggle.

Kyra seized her chance. “But deep down, you enjoy it. Otherwise you’d be bored to tears. You’d spend your days hunting, just to hand your catch

over to the damn Proxies and comply with their meat quotas. And don’t think I don’t know you hate having to do that. You may speak less than a snake without a tongue, but your face says it all.”

The warrior’s brows arched.

“See? I surprised you!” she said triumphantly. “You’d be a terrible spy, that’s for sure.”

Lone Wolf’s face turned somber and his forehead creased.

“Kyra is right,” Quiet Spirit said. “What your mouth is silent about, your face reflects.”

The warrior heaved a deep sigh, as if trying to stay calm.

“I protect. And I need no witch-man.”

Quiet Spirit muttered: “The spirit world is very dangerous. Better to go on here, in world of men.”

“I don’t fear either man or spirit,” the warrior said, and raised his spear.

Kyra could hold back no longer “And what about a woman?”

Lone Wolf rolled his eyes and complained under his breath. He turned his mount so as to show his back to the two women.

“They’re going to drive me crazy,” they heard him grumble in a whisper.

Kyra and Spirit laughed good-humoredly. Kyra knew that she should not annoy her good bodyguard, but sometimes she just could not help it. He was so reserved and stiff that he was almost asking for it. Luckily Spirit followed her lead, and that scene with the great warrior on his mount, straight and stiff as a board, with his back toward her, in a huff, was often repeated.

“It would be better if we went back…” Quiet Spirit said.

“Yes, you’re right, the big meeting,” Kyra said.

Spirit nodded. “It’s very important, and you must be there.”

“Come on, then. Today the fate of the People of the Steppes will be decided.”

The three of them rode through the beautiful plains for hours. With the sun setting behind them they reached the domains of their tribe, the Black Bears. Like the majority of tribes who lived in the Boundary, they were nomadic. They followed the game they hunted and searched for the best areas to spend the cold winters, but always within the limits marked out by the Gods. Even there, in the endless steppes, the Boundary was divided into Six Counties and the tribes who lived in each county were forbidden to travel from one to the other. The Gods kept the same Boundary plan, with counties, proxies, Regent and enforcers. But the people who lived there lived and understood their existence in a very different way to the Senoca. Kyra had experienced at first hand the tremendous rivalry and hostility between the tribes of each county. If a hunter was caught outside his own county, his throat would be cut. Fights between members of different tribes, even those belonging to the same county, were common. And she did not like it at all.

She dismounted at the entrance to the village, by the river, and two youngsters appeared at once from among the conical tent-dwellings and led her horse away to the communal pen beside the meadows. Her bottom was sore, as was her lower back. Her body did not appear to be getting used to riding those beautiful horses bareback. Short distances she could manage, but when she rode for hours she always ended up sore. *Someday I'll get used to it. I hope. Because I love riding on the plains, it's just that it wears me out,* she thought as she stretched.

Lone Wolf dismounted beside her in one graceful leap.

"You don't ride properly."

Kyra was stretching her waist with her hands behind her. She half-closed her eyes and poked out her tongue.

"Bad posture," the warrior added.

Spirit came over with two other warriors.

"They want you in Silver Eagle's tent. The other Chiefs have already arrived."

"Right, I'm on my way. Pray that everything may come out well."

Her friend looked up at the sky. "The Spirits of good will guide you. Have no fear."

Kyra smiled and headed to the enormous tent in the center of the plain. Hundreds of tents rose, surrounding that of the Chief of the tribe and forming a dozen concentric circles every dozen steps, with the Chief's tent in the center. That unique layout, and the picturesque conical tents of animal-skins and wooden poles, would have delighted Yosane. The memory of her friend brought an acute stab of pain to her chest. *We'll do it for you, my dear friend. One day we'll be free, and I'll avenge your death. That bastard Asu will pay for it with his life. I haven't forgotten. I'll never forget.* The memory and the pain helped her focus on the task ahead of her that evening. *Today I have to get the People of the Steppes to unite. Get them to forget arguments, distrust and ancestral hatreds and unite as one, which is something that hasn't been done in a thousand years. I wish my brother were here to advise me, but I'm alone, and I can't afford to fail.*

She entered the big tent, and at once thirty Chiefs pierced her with looks of distrust.

Silver Eagle spread his arms wide in greeting. "Come in and sit with us, Kyra of the Senoca. We were waiting for you."

Kyra gazed at the Chiefs for a moment. They were sitting on the floor with their legs crossed, forming a circle around the fire which was burning in the center of the great tent.

"Thank you, Great Chief," she said, and went to sit on his right.

"She's a woman, she can't take part in the Council," said one of the Chiefs. His face was as sullen as his skin was red.

"She's my guest, Gray Raven, and this is my dwelling. You'll respect me and you'll respect my guest," Silver Eagle said quietly but sternly.

The other Chief grumbled, then muttered: "She's pale as an evil spirit, I don't trust her" – then he spat into the fire, but said nothing more. Several Chiefs followed his example, showing their rejection of her presence. But not all of them.

That's a good beginning, she thought. She thanked her host with a glance.

The Chiefs were weather-worn, middle-aged men, with hard faces and pitiless eyes. They wore animal pelts, and on their faces and arms were designs which established their status as Great Chiefs. They all carried hunting knives at their waists. They had not been allowed to carry any other

weapons, although all of them had demanded they be permitted a knife. The distrust among those men was so evident that Kyra had the feeling that at any moment they would hurl themselves at each other's throats and the leather walls of the tent would be soaked in blood. The escorts of each Chief waited outside the village. They had not been allowed inside, to prevent any altercation.

"Welcome to my home, all of you, Chiefs of the People of the Steppes," he said. "The tribe of the Black Bears welcomes you. I hope the food has been to your taste. I know the journey has been a long one for many of you. If there is anything you need, you have only to ask for it." He indicated three youngsters who were waiting by the door. One of the Chiefs turned and asked for drink. Several others followed suit. The plumpest of the Chiefs asked for more food. The youngsters left at once.

"I see the Broken Spears of the First County. Who else is with you today at this Council?" Silver Eagle said, inviting the Chiefs to speak.

The leader of the Broken Spears rose and introduced the other four chiefs of the leading tribes of the First County who had accompanied him.

"We come on our own behalf, and also on behalf of the other minor tribes of our county."

Silver Eagle nodded solemnly several times.

"I see the Swift Deer of the Second County," the Great Chief went on, and one by one, all the other Great Chiefs of each county introduced themselves. When they had finished, Silver Eagle thanked them all for being there on that day, for they were all aware that this Council meant high treason, and if the Gods or their Enforcers ever found out, they would all die.

"Here today are represented the more than two thousand tribes which make up our great nation. We have been trying to call this council of tribes for years, without success. The Proxies, those traitors who serve the Regent and the Enforcers of the Gods, have always prevented us. But today we have managed to meet behind their backs, so as to reach an agreement. All of us want the same thing. All of us want freedom. We have been prisoners of the Gods for a thousand years. The moment has come for us to unite and rise as one."

“You’re the one who’s been trying to get us to meet,” said Chief Brown Fox of the Red Coyotes of the First County. “We don’t all agree with your vision.”

Gray Raven of the Wild Buffalos of the Second County and more than half the Chiefs agreed amid muttering.

Silver Eagle nodded several times. “I know. And this is why this meeting is so important. You, the great Chiefs of the Six Counties, are here today. We represent the entire People of the Steppes. Tonight we must leave our differences aside. We must talk and reach an agreement.”

Crazy Cougar of the Sixth County pointed an accusing finger at Gray Raven. “I’ve no intention of agreeing with that viper.”

“Who are you calling a viper, you stinking rat?”

Both Chiefs reached for their knives and made to lunge at each other. At once the Chiefs of both their allies and enemies began to get to their feet.

“Stop! Everyone stop!” Silver Eagle ordered.

“I’ll tear your eyes out!” Crazy Cougar said.

“You’ve no guts, you coward!”

They were all on their feet now, hands on knives. If a single one unsheathed their weapons, there would be blood in the tent.

Silver Eagle rose to his feet and pointed at them. “Whoever sheds blood will have his throat slit!” he threatened them. “Warriors!” he called. Immediately a dozen warriors armed with spears came into the tent. Among them was Lone Wolf. “Nobody will shed blood in my tent! All of you, sit down!”

The Chiefs looked at one another, then at the warriors, and finally sat down again. Kyra exhaled. It had been a close call.

“The next one who feels like wielding a weapon will do so against my champion,” Silver Eagle said. He nodded toward Lone Wolf. “I can assure you it will be a spectacle worth watching. And a very short one.”

The chiefs eyed the warrior and quickly looked away. Nobody would dare confront him.

“That’s better. We’ll solve our arguments as always, with fights between our warriors.”

Kyra stepped in at this point. “You should all fight the Regent and the Enforcers of the Gods, not your brothers.”

“Who are you to speak, woman?” Brown Fox said.

“Listen to what my guest has to say. I assure you that it will change your way of thinking,” Silver Eagle said.

“No woman will make me change my point of view, much less one so pale she seems to come from the spirit world.”

There was a growing murmur. The Chiefs wanted the woman to shut up.

But Kyra was not going to cower. She had never done it before and had no intention of starting now, no matter how hostile the atmosphere might be.

“I’m Kyra of the Senoca, and I’ve seen the face of the Gods.”

The murmur stopped. They all looked at Kyra and were silent.

“I come from a Boundary like this one, one where my people rose against the Gods and gained their freedom.”

“That’s impossible,” said Gray Raven.

“It is possible, and that’s why I’m here. I’ve come to help you gain your freedom.”

She told them what had happened in the Senoca Boundary, in detail, including her captivity in the Eternal City. She told them of the Gods, of their world. All of them listened to her words transfixed, as though she were telling them some incredible fable.

“I don’t believe a single word of this,” Brown Fox suddenly interrupted.

“Let her go on speaking,” said Crazy Cougar. “I want to know more.”

And to Kyra’s surprise, the murmuring was no longer against her, but for her to go on. And so she did, telling them about the rebellion and how they had brought down the Regent. When she finished, the Chiefs burst into cries and wild gestures. The tent became a chaos of overlapping conversations, each louder than the other. Silver Eagle waited a while until the chiefs had unburdened themselves of their views, then finally restored order.

“Do you understand now that the spirits of the Steppes have sent us this woman to be our guide in our fight for freedom?”

“If what the stranger says is true, the Regent and the Enforcers are lying to us,” said Crazy Cougar.

“They are,” said Kyra. “Don’t you realize they make you fight among yourselves so that you don’t unite? So that you compete uselessly among yourselves instead of fighting the oppressors? Lone Wolf’s body is full of scars. He’s a great fighter. Tell me, warrior, how many of those scars are from the Guard, from the Enforcers? I’ll tell you: not one.”

Once again the comments and cries filled the tent. Some were in support of Kyra’s argument, others protesting against such daring.

“My people, the Senoca,” Kyra went on, “are a people of fisher-folk. My pale-skinned brothers don’t know how to fight. They’re not strong, proud warriors like the children of the Steppes.” Her gaze swept along the Chiefs’ faces. “Their skin isn’t red, like the blood the warriors shed in their fights to prove their honor and bravery. But even so, my people united, and confronted the oppressors. They fought with their hearts and gained freedom.”

Gray Raven got to his feet. “You’re a liar. A people of weak fisher-folk who don’t know how to fight could never defeat the Enforcers,” he cried.

“Lies and more lies,” said Brown Fox, getting up and spitting at Kyra’s feet.

Silver Eagle was about to intervene, but Kyra stopped him with her hand. She looked at the two Chiefs in front of her and smiled.

“All right then, if I’m a liar and a weak fisherwoman, no doubt the two great warrior Chiefs will have no trouble in defeating me.”

“You dare us?” Gray Raven said, completely stunned.

“I dare you.”

Brown Fox burst into guffaws of laughter. “You, a woman?”

“Me, a woman.”

“If Silver Eagle weren’t protecting you…”

“I don’t need his protection. Although I’m grateful for it.” She turned to the Chief. “Let them fight against me.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to,” Silver Eagle said, trying to protect her.

“I am. And yes, I must.”

“All right, you have my permission.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Brown Fox hurled himself at Kyra, knife in hand. A moment later Gray Raven did the same. Kyra neither flinched nor made any attempt to defend herself. There was a crystalline flash, and she focused on the two attackers. Brown Fox reached her and crashed against the translucent protective sphere she had raised. He bounced back, fell on his back and dragged two other Chiefs down with him. Gray Raven stopped when he saw what had happened. He looked at Kyra, readied his knife, and with a whiplash movement of his arm sent it straight to the young woman’s heart. She concentrated on the flight of the knife and used her Power. She stretched her right arm forward, and the weapon stopped in mid-air. It hung there suspended. All the Chiefs were staring, their mouths hanging open.

“I believe this knife is yours,” Kyra said with perfect calm. She made it turn in the air and aimed it at Gray Raven with a twist of her wrist.

“Holy spirits!” cried Gray Raven.

The knife moved toward him and stopped just two finger-breadths away from his right eye, then remained suspended in the air.

“Best if you don’t move,” Kyra told him.

Brown Fox rose and leapt on Kyra like a great cat. She stretched out her left arm and used the power. The Chief stopped, held in the air in mid-leap.

“Let me go, you bitch!” he yelled.

“As you wish,” said Kyra. With a movement of her arm she guided him above the fire so as to let him drop.

“Nooooo!” yelled Brown Fox as the flames reached him.

She lifted him again with another twist of her wrist and left him levitating above the fire, close enough to let him feel the heat of the flames.

All the Chiefs were watching in astonishment. Kyra was controlling two of the most aggressive and savage of the Chiefs as if they were puppets. With just a single movement of her arms, both of them would die.

“Crazy Cougar rose. “We believe you. You can let them go.”

Kyra nodded. With a twist of her hands, she dropped the knife and Brown Fox. The two Chiefs stepped back in awe and stared at her.

“You’re not someone normal. You’re a spirit, the spirit that walks two worlds,” Crazy Cougar said.

“The one who walks this world and the world of the Gods,” Silver Eagle said.

The rest of the Chiefs gave their approval amid murmurs.

Kyra turned to them. “The People of the Steppes are strong and noble, a people of fierce, courageous warriors. Will you join me in the rebellion? Will you rise with me against the oppressors, against the traitors who serve the Gods? Will you fight beside me to gain your freedom so that you can all roam the plains free and in peace?”

The Chiefs thought for a moment and nodded.

“We’ll follow you,” Crazy Cougar said.

“For our People’s freedom!” said Silver Eagle.

The Chiefs rose to their feet and brandished their knives.

“For the People of the Steppes!”

Chapter 3

Ikai woke up shivering. He could feel a cold and dampness which penetrated to his very bones. That feeling had not left him ever since he had first set foot in that Boundary. He shook himself under the bearskin cape, trying to stir some warmth into his body. He felt a little better, though not much. He put his head out of the opening in the canvas tent with its covering of pelts and contemplated the great forest with its dew-bathed tapestry of green. The smell of wet earth and ferns was so intense he felt he could almost chew it.

He crawled out of the tent, got to his feet and flexed his muscles. He had not slept well; a host of concerns were tormenting his mind. He wrapped the cape more closely around him in search of warmth. All over, thousands of tents, and all manner of improvised shelters of canvas and pelts, covered the forest, extending northwards. Inside them slept the brave men and women of the highlands, resting before the battle that was to come.

He went on as far as the edge of the forest, taking care as he went to make no noise to avoid waking anybody. They needed the rest. Soon they would have to fight, and they would need every last ounce of energy they could find. He looked out at the intense green of the great valley at his feet. At the far end, in the distance, was the capital. They had to take it, and it would not be an easy business. Not in the least. He heard a sound beside him and turned. It was Burdin.

“Don’t you ever rest?” Ikai asked him. In fact he had never seen the warrior take a single break. He was the first to rise before the sun peered above the horizon, after which he worked all day without pause, and was the last to retire at night.

Burdin puffed out his chest. “We are the People of the Highlands, we don’t need to rest.”

Ikai tilted his head and took a good look at him. Burdin was both hard and tough, and an exceptional fighter. There were days when Ikai had wondered whether that full pelt the warrior always wore might have some

mystical powers which had possessed the warrior and granted him a supernatural prowess.

“I admire your strength, Burdin,” he acknowledged. “You inspire the men.”

“And I admire the way you use your head.”

Ikai could not help laughing. He had not expected such a direct reply.

“My thing is brute force. That’s how mother earth made me, me and some others of our people. What you have is truly special. Strength is not much use if there’s no level head to go with it. I’m not one for thinking too much, but that I know for sure.”

“To win, we need both of them.”

“Then it’s lucky that the three goddesses wanted our paths to cross.”

“There we’re agreed.”

The warrior pointed toward the city. “I’ve been out scouting. The Regent and his elite forces are hidden behind the capital walls. There aren’t many of them, but they’ve laid themselves out well to defend the walls. They’re not coming out, like you said they wouldn’t.”

“And the reinforcements from the county capitals?”

“There’s no trace of them. Those pigs will have disbanded, like the cowardly traitors they are, when they found out the armies from the capital had been defeated.”

“Don’t be so sure of that.”

Burdin scratched his head. “I can’t think how you always know what they’re going to do, it leaves me baffled.”

“Remember I’ve already been through this in my own Boundary. It’s like reliving a particularly bloody nightmare.”

“But with a happy ending.”

“Yes, we managed to free ourselves. But the cost was terribly high. Thousands of my people gave their lives. I don’t want that to happen here. I’m going to try to save as many lives as I can.”

“The goal is freedom,” Burdin said. He turned toward the forest and pointed to his people, who were beginning to get themselves ready. “Every single one of these here will give their life to reach it. They’ll die proudly.

Don’t you worry about the casualties. My people are used to harshness, we’re born and we die in the Highlands, and suffering is in our blood.”

“You’re a tough people, I know that.”

Burdin smiled, something he seldom did.

“So we are.” He turned back to look ahead, toward the distant capital.

“My people have suffered for over a thousand years. They deserve better than suffering and slavery. They deserve freedom. Lead us to victory, show us the way to follow, that’s all you need to worry about. My people will do the rest.”

Ikai sighed. “I’ll try. With all my heart, I promise.”

“I know the responsibility is enormous,” the warrior said, bowing his head. “Even I realize that, believe me. But you have me by your side. I’ll fight with you and protect you from those damned traitors.”

“Thanks, Burdin.”

The thousands of warriors camping in the forest were getting themselves ready: strong men and women, who knew how to wield spear, axe and sword. Unlike what had happened in the Senoca Boundary, in this one the rebels had spent years preparing for war by training their people so as to make them warriors before they rose up in arms.

“I still don’t understand how they had the courage to risk it… to learn to fight, for so long, under the threat of being captured and executed.”

“They’re tough, and brave. The Highlands don’t breed cowards.”

“How did you manage to do it without being found out by Hunters, Guards or Enforcers? Quite honestly I can’t understand it… I never thought it could be done… at least not in our Boundary. I ruled out that idea as impossible.”

“Ha! We owe that to Lurama. She planned it all. She’s a very special woman, a great leader, wise and very smart. Our first attempts at arming ourselves and learning to fight were disastrous. The Guards and Enforcers captured our men and killed them ruthlessly. Then came retribution. Even so, we tried several times, in different counties, but in the end they always found us and blood flowed. I almost died twice myself. Only by the grace of the Goddess Moon was I saved. After our last attempt, where the last leaders gave their lives, all seemed lost. For a long time there were no more

trials, nobody dared. And it was then that Lurama arrived. She sought me out and explained what we were doing wrong and what we should do instead."

"And she convinced you."

"No, not at first. I'd already lost a lot of friends, and their families had suffered the consequences. I didn't want to lose any more of them…I didn't want more families to suffer… I didn't think it was possible. They always found us, one way or another, and all our braves ended up dead."

Ikai bowed his head. "And how did she convince you?"

"*We'll use what we are*," was what she told me.

Ikai was even more intrigued by this.

"*Who are we?"* she asked me. *"The people of the Highlands,"* I replied. And she said: *"Exactly, that's what we are and that's what we'll use against the enemy"*.

Ikai thought for a moment. He began to understand the meaning of those words and a slight smile appeared on his lips.

"The lay of the land!"

"That's it. I didn't understand it at first, but she explained." He drew his sword and pointed to the higher lands to the north, where they could make out mountains with their peaks in the clouds and steep, craggy terrain at their feet. "What we did was use our land against them. Most of our Boundary is made up of steep hills, mountains to the north and great forests with many rivers that flow down to the lowlands. All of those are our allies. Only the capital and the southern part are valleys with wide stretches of open land. The two southernmost counties, where we can't hide, we use to get hold of weapons and supplies, the other four counties where the land is rough and difficult of access, we use to train our warriors. We go up to the highest and furthest forests to the north, and we train inside big caves in the heart of the mountains."

"I see. The Guard would never go that far, it would be too costly. Not even the Enforcers would, without a definite reason."

"That's exactly what Lurama said. We had to be as cautious as possible and never give the Guard or the Enforcers any reason to come looking for us. It took a long time to organize it all, it was a slow, costly process. I often lost my patience." He gave a snort. "But Lurama made me think about it

and understand that it was the way to go. It took us years, long years… but gradually we did it. Every few months we had new litters of trained Wolf-Warriors, ready to fight. They grew up and went on training, becoming Bear-Warriors. After a few years we had enough Bears to start a revolt. What I'd always thought couldn't be done was accomplished. Lurama made sure that no one raised suspicions, she even sacrificed those who had, so as to save the rest. Before they fell into the hands of the Guard, she gave the order to kill them."

"A woman who's both strong and intelligent. You need great courage to do that."

"And that's the reason why we named her our High Matriarch."

"I see," Ikai said thoughtfully. "What do you mean by High Matriarch? I understand that she's the leader of you all, isn't she? I've always assumed that."

"Now she is, yes, but not at first. She was the Matriarch of the First County. Each county has one, according to the tradition among my people since before we were enslaved. A tradition which the Regent persecutes with an iron fist, just as he does with our beliefs in Mother Earth and her daughters Moon and Sun."

Ikai nodded. Burdin slapped his chest with his fist and his face hardened.

"But we resisted, we always have. We chose our Matriarchs in secret, we keep our beliefs, our culture, in spite of the persecution, in spite of the fact that it's against the Law of the Gods and punished with death."

"In my Boundary the ancient beliefs aren't approved of either, but they weren't persecuted like that."

"Well, you were lucky. Here many have died for not renouncing our beliefs. In our culture the Matriarch represents the woman who gives life to her village, her county, the one who guides and protects."

"I realized when I first arrived that they're your spiritual guides."

"That's right. Behind the backs of the Proxies who've been imposed by the Regent."

"They're risking a lot. They've executed several in the time I've been here with you."

“Those swine will pay, believe me, they’ll pay in blood and pain,” Burdin said, and raised a huge fist.

Ikai snorted and shook his head. Burdin stared at his sword and seemed to lose himself in his own memories.

“I don’t know if you’ve already been told this. Some time ago there was a sacred ceremony, with all Six Matriarchies, under the protection of the Three Goddesses, and there Lurama was proclaimed High Matriarch of the six counties. Since then she’s been our Leader, and we follow her without hesitation.”

“No, I hadn’t been told.”

Burdin brandished his sword. “The only thing you need to know about my people is that they have strong and pure hearts. They won’t fail you.”

Ikai nodded. “That I know.”

“And now you’d better go and see Lurama in her tent, she wants to speak to you,” Burdin said, and sheathed his sword.

“Very well.”

Ikai left him to the preparations for the fight, and crossed the forest to the northernmost area, where the command tent was. As he went through the immense forest, he watched the people getting ready for battle. They were just as Burdin had described them, and now he was able to understand them better. He passed a group of young boys and girls who wore the pelts of wolves and other animals over their everyday clothes. They were tending to their spears and shields. *Wolf-Warriors*, he thought, and saluted them. They stopped what they were doing and saluted back. They all knew who he was and treated him with the greatest respect. Higher up he identified several groups of men and women who wore no skins over their clothes. *They’re not warriors, but they’ve joined the rebellion and they’ll fight just the same.* At last he reached Lurama’s tent in the deepest and steepest part of the forest. It was surrounded by twenty Bear-Warriors on guard duty.

“Liberator,” the one apparently in command greeted him. He was bigger than Burdin and looked even more threatening. Ikai saw that the others were all the same size. Those men, with the bear pelts they wore, heads and all, would terrify the most daring. Ikai was glad they were on the same side.

“Lurama wants to see me.”

The Bear-Warrior went into the big tent and came out a moment later.

“You may enter,” he said, as he held the flap open.

Lurama received him inside with a warm smile of welcome.

“Come in and make yourself comfortable, Liberator,” she said, and gestured toward a rough wooden stool beside a brazier.

“Thank you,” Ikai said, and sat down. His body was grateful for the pleasant warmth from the brazier.

“One of the advantages of being a High Matriarch,” Lurama said with a wink.

Ikai smiled, getting closer to the brazier. “I can’t seem to get used to the dampness of your land.”

“Is your land warmer?”

Ikai nodded.

“Man gets used to everything, this experienced woman can assure you of that.”

“Well, let’s hope this man gets used to it soon.”

They both laughed, and Lurama offered him a glass of hot wine.

“It will do you good, it comforts the spirit and the bones.”

Ikai took it and tasted it. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. I wish to ask you something, but first let me thank you for leading us here. So close to freedom that it’s within reach. This is something I’d only dared to dream of.”

“You and your people had already been preparing for this rebellion for years. All I’ve done is help you by sharing what I learnt in my own Boundary.”

Lurama smiled. “Don’t forget that you bring us that brilliant intelligence of yours. Without your plans we wouldn’t be here today, however long we might have been planning and preparing for it. And I’m not at all sure we would have succeeded. My people have strong arms and great spirit, but there aren’t many among them with a mind like yours. This old woman grasps these things, I’ve always had an eye for people, for knowing their strong points and their weak ones, so don’t try to deny it.”

“I’ll accept the compliment,” Ikai smiled back. “Thank you.”

“It’s true that we’ve spent more than ten years preparing warriors clandestinely, instilling courage in the people so they may rise against the tyranny of the Gods, but we didn’t have a leader who could guide us in that final stage, to the actual day of the rebellion. That’s why I waited, waited for the right moment, for the right person. And then you arrived, and the sky opened before my eyes. I had no doubt of what I must do, I knew it at once. The waiting, the preparation, were over, it was time to act. And look where we are! At the gates of the capital, at the gates of freedom.”

“You’re a wise woman and a great leader,” Ikai said. His admiration for her grew every day. She was leading the revolt and all her people more or less on her own, and she did it with remarkable temperance and intelligence.

Lurama sat down beside him. She wore a thick gray woolen tunic and a cape with a pelt hood. Her long straight hair had lost the blond of its youth and turned gray, but her eyes were still young and keen.

“We’ve worked hard and achieved a great deal. We can’t fail now that we’re so close. The people have arisen, as you said they would, and now there’s no way back. Not now we’re so near our goal. It’s victory or death.”

“That’s right. We’ll make it. Your people are strong, they’ll succeed.”

She nodded, her eyes filled with hope. “Tell me, Liberator, how long has it been since you came to me?”

“Three long years.”

“To me it’s been like the blink of an eye. Times passes quickly when there’s so much to do.”

“I remember when you first met me you nearly ordered Burdin to cut my head off.”

Lurama laughed whole-heartedly.

“I took you for a fool. Presenting yourself before me like that, talking about freedom, rebellion, about facing the Gods, without being one of us, was crazy, to say the least.”

“I had to take the risk. There was no other option. It took me a long time to travel this Boundary without being found out and work out whether it was the same system as ours, whether the organization, the structure and the Boundary itself were the same. Whether the Gods repeated their plan of slavery or whether there were variations.”

“You convinced me that they were.”

“They’re practically identical. The Gods use the same pattern for every Boundary. The only thing that’s different is the race of the people and their location within the great continent. My Boundary is in the north-east of the continent. This one is in the north-west, more or less at opposite ends. I had to cross the great continent to get here. In the east the weather is warmer and the land is flatter. Here in the west, the weather is wetter and the region more mountainous.”

“What is there further West? I’ve always wondered.”

“The sea. The great continent is surrounded by sea. To the west of this Boundary is the ocean, just as it is to the East of mine.”

“And how did you get to me? Who gave you my name? For years I’ve been fighting in secret, since my youth, but very few people knew I was the leader of those who sought to rise against the Gods. You’ve never told me: why?”

“Getting to you was complicated. I had to use certain methods…which you wouldn’t approve of… I’d rather not reveal them to you…”

Lurama looked into his eyes, as if she were reading his soul in them.

“I know there’s no evil in you. What you did was necessary. But I would like to know one thing, which is why I called you.”

Ikai sighed. He feared the question she was about to ask.

“You’re not a common man, Liberator, my Matriarch’s instinct tells me that and it’s not often wrong. Am I right?”

Ikai considered his reply. He could not afford to lose Lurama’s trust, he must be honest.

“It’s true, I’m not like most men.”

“The mist…the thing that covered the edge of the forest and hid the trap against the Regent’s army… wasn’t a natural one. I know the climate of my land very well, and I’d never seen such a solid, heavy mist on the edge at this time of year. Was it you?”

“Yes, it was me. I had to hide the trunks. If the soldiers had seen them they wouldn’t have fallen into the trap.”

“How did you do it? There’s nobody in my village who can do that sort of thing. Only the Power of the Gods can do something which is impossible

for men.”

“You’re not mistaken. I did it by using the Power of the Gods.”

For the first time since they had known each other, Ikai saw doubt in Lurama’s firm, serene eyes.

“You can trust me. I’m no God, and nor do I serve them.”

“Then what are you? Help me to understand.”

Ikai realized that he might lose the trust she had bestowed on him, so he decided to tell her the truth.

“What I’m about to tell you isn’t easy to accept, but I hope you do.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

He told her about the Gods, about the hybrids, and about what went on in Alantres, the Eternal City. He explained the extraordinary anomalies: the hybrids with power. He told her about Adamis, the Discs, and the Power. Lurama listened in silence, without interrupting, hanging on every word. When Ikai had finished, she poured herself a glass of wine and drank slowly.

“You’re a hybrid with power.”

Ikai nodded. “The Power runs in my blood, in my family’s.”

“Can you show me?”

“Yes. Don’t be frightened.”

Lurama tensed, breathed deeply and relaxed her shoulders. She nodded in assent.

Ikai took out the disc and placed it over his hand.

When she saw it Lurama tensed once again. “The Eyes use those against us!”

“And we use the discs against them. This one belongs to the God-Prince Adamis. It contains his Power. He made five for us and in each one, in the center, is a tiny pip with his power.”

“Give me a demonstration, please. I want to understand.”

“Very well.” He activated the disc, and it rose above the palm of his hand. He concentrated and searched for Lurama’s aura. He perceived it clearly in his mind; it was a strong, clear one, although it no longer shone with the intensity of youth. Softly and carefully he raised her into the air,

two hand-spans above the ground. The leader of the People of the Highlands choked back a cry. Ikai raised her another hand-span, until she was almost touching the roof of the tent.

“I’m going to do something,” he warned her. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Go ahead,” she said from where she was floating above the ground.

Ikai gave the order to the disc. It shone, and Lurama began to turn gently on herself, as if she were a top. The Matriarch laughed and let herself be carried. Ikai changed the direction of the turn and kept her rotating for a moment. Then he put her delicately back on the ground.

“It’s… it’s…fascinating. And the possibilities…”

“I’m glad you understand it that way.”

“I won’t try to hide it from you, I felt fear, and that Power frightens me. But I can also see its advantages, the opportunities it could bring us, as long as it was in good hands… if we used it against the Enforcers…”

“Others won’t see it that way. They’ll fear the Power, because it comes from the Gods. That’s why I keep it hidden.”

“Yes, that’s true. There are many among my people who wouldn’t understand, or accept it. We must be wary and not use it openly. But let me assure you that you needn’t worry about me. I accept it, and I accept you, just as you are.”

“Your people couldn’t have chosen a better High Matriarch. Your wisdom and understanding are a blessing for all.”

“It is you who are a blessing for my people, Liberator. What else can you do with that disc?”

“Not everything I’d like to, as yet. Learning to use the Power has required a lot of practice, and I’ve only discovered a minuscule portion of what I believe it can do. I haven’t had the good fortune to have a teacher to learn from. All I know I’ve learnt by trial and error. I’m still trying to learn every day. It’s a hard task, and often frustrating, but when I learn a new skill it’s a unique and glorious feeling.”

“And from your face and the passion you show when you talk about it, I believe you must find it very satisfying.”

“I certainly do.”

“Well, go on trying. In this life, all professions require years of apprenticeship. Very likely it’s the same with the Power. Go on learning. We’ll need it.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true.”

The flap at the entrance of the tent opened and one of the Bear-Warriors came in with an air of determination.

“Matriarch, everything is ready. As you requested.”

“Very well.”

He held up his horn. “Shall I call the summons?”

Lurama sighed heavily. “Yes, summon them all. It’s time.”

“At your order,” the warrior said, and went out.

A moment later all the horns sounded throughout the forest.

Lurama turned to Ikai. “We’ll carry on with this conversation. Now it’s time to fight.”

“I hope we may survive to finish it.”

“You’ll guide us to victory today, I’m sure of that.”

Ikai sighed and said nothing. He was not sure, and deep down, nor was Lurama. But the leader did not want to reveal the fact.

“To battle!” cried Ikai.

“For the three goddesses!”

Chapter 4

“Will they come?” Kyra asked Lone Wolf.

The warrior shrugged and was silent.

“They’ll come,” Quiet Spirit assured her.

Kyra turned and smiled at her friend.

“You see?” she said to Lone Wolf. “There’s no harm in saying something nice every once in a while.” The warrior heaved a deep sigh and went to look after the horses. Quiet Spirit giggled and went after him. Kyra watched them enter the gully where the animals were resting, drinking from a narrow ravine. That small wood of elms was the only cover in leagues. The meeting point. If, that is, they deigned to come.

She scanned the horizon. Nothing. Not a trace. Only steppes of dry grass in every direction, with small rolling hills here and there in the distance, decorated with a few lonely trees. This land was beautiful, but it made her feel a curious sense of loneliness. She felt strange in the midst of an immense plain that did not wish to take her to its heart. For Lone Wolf and Quiet Spirit that was their mother earth, the steppe, but for her it was a long way from the blue embrace of Mother Sea. Or perhaps it was because she felt lonely. Yes, maybe that was it. Seeing Lone Wolf passing Quiet Spirit the water-skin he had just filled at the ravine, barely looking at her, and her shyness as she accepted it and thanked him, looking away from the warrior’s body, made her think of Adamis. And the sense of loneliness settled on her like a dark cloak that subdued her spirit.

She recalled how the Prince-God had nearly lost his life in helping her, and intense feelings, sweet and at the same time terribly bitter, overwhelmed her. Sweet because of the love Adamis had shown her, not in words but in his actions, by sacrificing himself for her, by helping her when everything was lost. They would not have gained their freedom if it had not been for him, would not have survived the Enforcers. And bitter because of

the consequences of his sacrifice. In helping her, in intervening on behalf of the rebels, he had doomed himself in the eyes of his people. His own father, the High King of Ether, had sentenced him to death. The sentence had been carried out. Adamis had been executed, the Slayer of Kings buried in his stomach. Death awaited him and pursued him. He had not been able to dodge it, and it would chase him until it caught up with him.

Kyra remembered the terrible moment when she thought she had lost him forever. The unfathomable pain she felt. And the overflowing joy she experienced when she had him back, barely alive, and dreadfully injured. She recalled, word by word, the conversation with the Witch of the Lake which had changed her life, when the Witch had appeared to her and taken her to her dwelling: an underground temple beneath the lake.

“What am I doing here? Why did you bring me?” Kyra had said when she found herself in that round chamber which reminded her too vividly of the Dungeons of Oblivion.

“You’ve spent days mourning his death beside my lake.”

“I don’t need your sympathy.”

“I know, I can see the strength of your spirit, my young lioness. I didn’t bring you here to offer you sympathy, but to ask for your help.”

Kyra stared at her, not understanding. “My help? I don’t understand… why?”

“You’d better come with me. That way I’ll be able to explain better.

“I’m not going anywhere with you! You think I don’t know who you are? You may have fooled the farmers and woodsmen of this county, but I know what you are, I know your people, I’ve lived among hem and I recognize you.”

The witch laughed dryly. “You’re smart, more so than your fiery character is willing to show. I like that. I believe we’ll get along well.”

“I doubt it very much. The Golden are my enemies, and you’re a Golden, a Goddess.”

The witch acknowledged this with a small bow.

“Yes, indeed I am. Although I’ve been hiding the fact for a long time.”

“You can take that mask off, I know it hides golden skin. I know you’re with them. You don’t fool me.”

“We, the Children of Arutan, wear this mask, and maybe one day I’ll take it off, but today’s not the moment. And no, my young lioness, I may be a Golden, but I’m not with them, rather I’m against them.”

There was confusion in Kyra’s eyes. “Against them?”

“I’m one of the Ancients, one of the leaders of the Children of Arutan. I’m on the side of Mother Nature, and against those who corrupt it, be they Men or Golden. I and my people.”

“I’m not interested in your reasons. Let me go.”

“But I need your help with the Prince of Ether.”

When she heard this, Kyra’s heart gave a leap.

“What horrible things are you going to do with his body? Let him be, let him rest in peace!”

“You’re mistaken. You’d better follow me.”

The Witch turned and left the hall. Kyra hesitated for a moment. She looked for a way out, but the chamber only had a single door and the witch was leaving through it. So she followed her. The Witch led her along several tunnels until they reached a spherical silver chamber. In the center of it was a white marble bed, and on it Adamis was lying.

Suddenly the Prince-God opened his eyes and moaned in pain.

Kyra was petrified, her heart in her mouth, unable to breathe.

“By Oxatsi! It can’t be!” she cried.

“I’m afraid it can,” the Witch said.

Adamis moaned again.

Kyra ran to his side and put her hands on his face. His eyes were closed, and he looked as though he was in great pain. He was cold, and his golden skin had turned a greenish hue. A putrid smell emanated from his body.

“My love! You’re alive!” she cried, overcome with joy, tears running down her cheeks.

“He can’t hear you. He’s more in the other world than in this one.”

Kyra kissed him on the lips, but he did not respond.

“How did you save him? He was dead, I don’t understand,” she said, unable to believe what her eyes were telling her.

“Not exactly… he was dead for men, practically dead for the Golden. You see, girl, our bodies, although similar to yours, work differently. Time passes more slowly as far as our organisms are concerned. That’s why we live ten times longer than you. In the same way, death doesn’t arrive so quickly. The Slayer of Kings poisoned him, and it will kill him, eventually. But when you brought him to me it hadn’t yet done that, albeit only just. Now his body is paralyzed and he’s dying, but he’s still alive.”

“You mean to say he’ll live?” Kyra cried, filled with a joy she could not restrain.

“I didn’t say that. I can’t stop the poison, and there’s no antidote. Most of his body has already been corrupted by the noxious substance. But I’ve managed to slow it down. I’ve postponed the end.”

“That gives us hope!”

“Yes, it does, girl, but I need him to come back to this world, or else his body won’t fight the poison and we’ll lose him. I’ve tried by all the means Mother Nature has put within my reach, but I haven’t been able to summon him back. If he doesn’t wake, he’ll die.”

“Is that why you brought me?”

“Yes, that’s why.”

“And what interest do you have in Adamis?” Kyra asked, suddenly suspecting foul play.

“The Prince of Ether is important for the Children of Arutan, for our cause. The High Kings pursue us, they wish to finish us off, the Prince is an important ally.”

“Are we on the same side?”

The Witch nodded. “We are.”

“I’ll bring him back, even if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

The Witch smiled. “Sooner than that, I hope.”

And for a time, which to her seemed like years, Kyra tried every possible way of waking the Prince. But he was deep in a sleep which it seemed impossible to disturb. Neither her kisses, nor her caresses, nor her whispers, nor her care, nothing managed to stir him. She was beginning to lose hope.

“Wake up, wake up, you proud prince,” she said furiously, hammering on his chest. But a moan was her only answer. His eyes remained closed.

“I’m here, open your eyes. Come on, open them.”

But Adamis could not see her.

Kyra tried everything, without success. He was there, in front of her, and their bodies were touching, but not their souls. And it was at that moment that an idea began to form in her mind. Not their bodies, but their spirits were something else. She remembered what Adamis had taught her: her Power came from Ether, from the spirit of things in nature. Without stopping to think twice she took out his disc and summoned its power. She focused on glimpsing his aura, and as soon as she did so she used all her being to penetrate it. Until then she had always used the Power to interact with things and people, to move them, hurl them, even break them, but never to penetrate them.

Just as she had guessed, at first it was impossible. But she refused to give up and went on trying. Her beloved’s life was at stake. She tried and tried, without response. Looking for help, she told the Witch what she was trying to do. The Witch thought for a while and then prepared a reagent to make her concentration and focus more powerful. Kyra drank it, and things changed. She concentrated on Adamis’s chest, on a particular point in it, and in that spot his aura began to weaken and change color. After a while she managed to make a breach in it. Then she let her spirit emerge, as if it were a ghost, and it slipped into the crack, to enter Adamis’s chest.

Kyra’s spirit found that of Adamis, and both of them united.

He reacted and opened his eyes in shock. He screamed.

“Kyra…” he stammered,

She lost her concentration and her spirit came back to her body.

“I’m here, with you.”

Adamis looked into her eyes. “Kyra, my love.”

And they joined in an intensely loving kiss, with her tears running down his face.

“You’ll get well,” she assured him. “We’ll save you.”

It took them a whole year before he could get down from the marble bed by himself. A year of terrible pain and suffering which he bore with extraordinary strength and fortitude. Under the care of the wise witch and her knowledge of healing they managed, little by little, to make the Prince-

God’s body regain some vitality. But it would take him an eternity to recover, if some day he ever managed to. He never once complained, either at the bad hand destiny had played him or at the suffering he had to bear daily so as to manage the slightest action or movement. Every step was an agony, every gesture a hell of pain. But he never protested, not even when the witch assured him that she could not heal him and that the poison would live in him until it finally killed him.

Even now, Kyra felt that instant as if it were fresh. And every time she remembered, her hand went to her chest. It was there that she had felt something tremendously intense and wonderful when their spirits had joined. Something which would always unite them. *Oh, how much I’d give to touch you, feel you by my side, my love.* But that would have to wait for a better moment.

Lone Wolf crouched down beside her. He had appeared so stealthily that she had not even noticed. She came back from her memories and focused on the present. The warrior began to sharpen his hunting knife with a whetstone. He had the habit of constantly looking after his weapons.

“You’d do better looking after her,” Kyra said, nodding toward Quiet Spirit, who was tending to the horses.

The warrior frowned and gave her a look of incomprehension.

“Don’t play dumb, you know perfectly well what I’m talking about.”

Lone Wolf gazed at Quiet Spirit for a moment, then went back to his weapon.

“By Oxatsi! It’s clearer than water. You can’t stop glancing at each other, and when you’re close to each other, sparks fly. Are you that blind?”

“I… don’t know…”

“Yeah… yeah… as chatty as always. You’ll have to tell her how you feel, won’t you? Because you’re drooling, big man,” she said, with a gesture of despair.

“Maybe… she doesn’t want…”

“Of course she does! I can assure you she does. If you’d rather, I’ll tell her myself,” she said with an impish smile.

“No!”

She giggled. “Well, go catch her a cougar or something, but tell her. Life’s too short and too full of troubles not to seize the good moments when we can and share them with the ones we love. Heed me.”

Lone Wolf nodded. He eyed Quiet Spirit and nodded again, as if trying to convince himself.

Kyra slapped him hard on his strong back.

“They’re coming,” Lone Wolf said all of a sudden. He waved his arm to the east.

“A dozen riders, as we’d agreed.”

“Four Great Chiefs and their champions,” said Quiet Spirit, who had come to stand beside them.

Kyra breathed out sharply in relief. “To tell you the truth, I wasn’t sure they’d come.”

“They’d given their word,” Lone Wolf said, sounding offended.

Quiet Spirit put her hand on his arm. “Not all our people know honor, or respect their word, as you do.”

The warrior looked into her eyes for a moment and bowed his head.

“Yes, there are men without honor.”

“Let’s hope these ones have it,” said Kyra.

“We must trust,” Quiet Spirit said. “They’re the four most important Chiefs of this County. We need them on our side. They control more than a hundred small tribes. Their decision is key.”

The twelve riders came toward them, raising a light cloud of dust in their wake. They entered the gully and rode down to the ravine.

“Welcome,” Kyra said with open arms.

The riders looked at her closely, without dismounting.

“Greetings, spirit that walks two worlds,” said one of the four Chiefs. He was thin, with a sharp and prominent nose like the beak of a bird, and long white hair. He was old, and did not seem fit for battle, but he radiated wisdom. Kyra recognized him from the meeting of the Chiefs.

“That’s what they call me here in the steppes.”

“I am White Owl, of the Fifth County.”

“I remember you.”

“And these are my blood brothers. We are here. I gave my word at the Council of Chiefs, and my word is sacred, like the sun that warms the steppes.”

“It reflects honor on you. Your forces?”

“They’re waiting, a little further east.”

“So what is the plan?” asked one of the Chiefs. He was young, the only young man among them; the others were more like White Owl in age and appearance. His body was athletic, and though he did not look too strong he appeared agile and determined. His eyes were light, his nose small. His face had a touch of feminine beauty, emphasized by his straight, shoulder-length chestnut hair.

“You must forgive my nephew Swift Deer. He’s eager to wield his weapon against the oppressors.”

“Those treacherous swine killed my father, your brother, and I swore to the moon by sacred ritual to avenge his death. Not a single Proxy or Guard will be left alive when I’ve finished.” As he spoke he wielded a short, light axe.

White Owl bowed his head, and his eyes turned melancholy.

“My brother was a great man, a great Chief. He brought the message of freedom to his tribe, he made it take hold, and that cost him his life.”

“And now revenge will be mine.”

White Owl motioned him to calm his fury and Swift Deer’s body seemed to relax a bit, but his gaze was still fiery.

Kyra pointed to the north. “We’ll head to the great river. There we’ll meet with the forces of Crazy Cougar of the Sixth County. Silver Eagle and the warriors of the Fourth County have already set off for the meeting-point.”

The Chiefs nodded. “With our braves of the Fifth County, that makes half the tribes. But what about the other half? I don’t trust Brown Fox the least little bit and Gray Raven even less, and they’re in control of the First and Second Counties.”

“They’ll be there,” Kyra replied, but with less than total conviction.

White Owl sat up straight on his mount. “I’m not so sure. You ridiculed them in front of all the Great Chiefs: they won’t forget that. They’ll never

forgive you. Their pride is as great as the prairies we walk on and their hate as wide as the sky over our heads."

"If they don't come I'll go and get them myself, and drag them by their nether parts."

The Chiefs laughed heartily.

"I like you. You have courage and honor. And the spirits of the steppes have blessed you with their power. Let's hope they don't back down, or even worse, betray us."

"The die is cast. Today the rebellion begins," Kyra assured them. "We'll make it. One way or another we'll gain our freedom."

The old Chief smiled, and his wrinkled face showed his age clearly.

"I'll follow you, spirit that walks two worlds. Lead us to the battle."

Kyra was about to answer when the warning came from Lone Wolf.

"Danger, to the east!"

They turned. Crowning a hill there appeared riders, with a cloud of dust behind them.

Kyra shaded her eyes to see better. "Who are they?"

White Owl sighed heavily.

"It's the Guard. A hundred men or so. They're coming for us. We've been betrayed."

Kyra looked at Lone Wolf, who nodded.

"How do you know it is?" she said. "They're too far away for us to make them out clearly. Maybe they're hunters passing through."

"By the dust they raise. Their mounts are saddled and shod, not like ours. We ride bareback. And they're coming to hunt us, unless there's somebody else round here plotting against the Regent and the Gods?"

She looked at Lone Wolf again, and he nodded.

"It makes sense," said Quiet Spirit.

"Then someone has betrayed us. And the traitor has to be here among us. Nobody else knew about the meeting-point." She stared at the Chiefs and their champions, her eyes hard and cold, but none of them made the least move to run away.

Lone Wolf pointed at the first riders, who were galloping towards them. “We have no time.”

“Let’s get away before they trap us,” Kyra said to Lone Wolf.

But White Owl dismounted from his horse. And with him, his three champions. Instantly the other Chiefs and their champions followed suit.

“Why are you dismounting? We have to get away!” she urged them.

Quiet Spirit whispered in her ear: “The Chiefs are too old. They won’t manage to escape.”

Kyra understood. Those brave men had too much pride to let themselves be humiliated by being hunted like hares as they fled.

Lone Wolf came with the horses. “Come on! I can see Hunters at their head.”

“But…” She looked at the Chiefs, then at the enemy she could already see clearly riding fast toward them.

White Owl stuck his spear in the ground. “Today I will die here, in my own land, fighting for freedom. I don’t regret it. It’s a glorious end, the end every warrior wishes. I have lived a life of slavery. I shall die the death of a warrior, in freedom.”

Kyra’s eyes moistened as she heard this.

“Perhaps we’ll make it,” she said.

The great Chief gazed at her tenderly. “Thank you, but no, we’d doom you all. Get away to safety. Escape today, then fight tomorrow. This is the good fortune the prairies have dealt me,” he said, spreading his arms wide, “and I will embrace it.” Then he turned to the other chiefs. “I’m honored that you’ll stay and fight beside me to the end. We’ve known each other all our lives, and I couldn’t ask for better company on the journey to the world of spirits.” The other Chiefs nodded and stuck their spears in the ground.

“It’ll be a glorious end,” Swift Deer said.

“Not for you, nephew. You must survive.”

“I’ll fight beside you! We’re family, blood of the same blood. I’ll die fighting, beside my own people!”

“But that won’t be today. You’re the best rider in the steppes. Nobody can catch up with you.” He indicated Kyra, Lone Wolf and Quiet Spirit. “I need you to guide our forces.”

“But uncle, I can’t leave you.”

“We’ve fallen into a trap. They want to cut off the lion’s head before it can use its claws. If all of us Chiefs die here, who’ll guide our warriors, who are waiting to be led into battle? No, you and the one who walks two worlds must survive and reach our forces, to guide them to war. Be a worthy son of my brother and do my bidding, for the good of the People of the Steppes.”

Swift Deer gazed at his uncle, then at the other Chiefs.

“I’ll honor my uncle’s wishes.”

“Leave, then, quickly,” White Owl said.

Kyra gave the Chiefs a nod of respect.

“I promise you we’ll gain freedom. Your sacrifice won’t be in vain.”

Quiet Spirit and Lone Wolf set off at a gallop.

White Owl nodded to Kyra, who galloped after her friends.

Swift Deer leapt onto his horse, and his champions after him.

“Guide them to victory,” his uncle said.

“You have my word.”

They galloped away at a dizzying speed. In no time they caught up with the others, who were riding as if the hounds of hell were at their heels, and overtook them.

“Spirit that walks two worlds, follow me! I, Swift Deer, will take you to the warriors of my people!”

Kyra glanced back. The Hunters had almost reached the elm wood. They would soon be upon the Chiefs.

Let’s hope the warriors are still there, although I have an ominous feeling about this.

Chapter 5

“We have to take the gates of the city!” Ikai cried with the full force of his lungs. It was pouring with rain, and a gust of wind filled his mouth with water.

“Forward, Warriors of the Highlands!” yelled Burdin beside him.

Two arrows buried themselves in Ikai’s shield and another in Burdin’s with a dull powerful impact. Several men in front of them fell dead and lay there in the mud-hole which the ground they were walking across had by now turned into.

“Get behind the battering ram!” cried Ikai. He had lowered his shield far enough to let him see what was happening in front of him. They were a hundred paces from the city gates, and death was raining from the battlements.

“With pride! Heave!” Burdin yelled with all his might.

The colossal battering ram moved on its eight wheels of steel-reinforced wood with a shriek of effort. More than a hundred Wolf-Warriors were behind it, giving it all the strength of their young bodies. The weight of the gigantic siege machine and the mud it had to move across were turning that last stage into a titanic task.

“Put your backs into it!” Burdin encouraged them. “Today will make you into men! Today you’ll become Bears!”

In front of the battering ram, more than ten thousand enraged warriors were trying to take the gates and the southern section of the wall in an assault on the capital which was little short of suicidal. Ikai could barely think in the midst of that deafening din of howls and the lashing of the storm.

A new shower of arrows came down on the battering ram and the brave men pushing it.

“Shields up!” shouted Ikai.

At his order the young warriors stopped pushing and as one, raised their left arms where their small round wooden shields were tied. There came the whistle of arrows cutting the air, and like the lightning which announces thunder, death fell from the sky. The arrows struck shields and men with almost the same hollow sound. Sharp on shields, softer on the bodies of men. Twenty or so young men fell amid muffled moans.

Burdin turned. “Move the fallen! Replace them!” he ordered the warriors who were moving on behind the ram.

At once a new team took up their position and pushed with all their might.

“It’s going at a snail’s-pace,” Burdin complained.

Ikai calculated the distance to the gate. “There’s not far to go. They’ll make it.”

Another volley of arrows fell on the warriors who had managed to reach the foot of the wall. The front lines did not even have time to position themselves ready to climb it, but fell dead before they could even try.

“They’d better. We’re being massacred!”

Ikai shielded his eyes from the rain. More than ten thousand warriors were hurling themselves at the eastern part of the wall, carrying ladders and hooked ropes. To the west the scene was repeated amid savage shouting. From his position he could not see them, but he knew that another ten thousand were attacking the north wall.

Burdin brushed his wet hair out of his eyes with his forearm. “And this storm isn’t helping us at all,” he said.

“It’s not hindering us either. At least not for the moment.”

“I don’t follow. Climbing these walls in the rain is going to be a complicated business.”

“So is shooting arrows and hitting the target in these conditions. Besides, they can’t use fire against us in this storm.”

“Ah, I see…”

“For now, the plan’s working. We’re already at the foot of the four walls, and there aren’t as many casualties as I’d anticipated.”

“Sure, but they’ll begin to pile up if they don’t manage to climb those walls.”

“That’s why the battering-ram is the key. It has to get as far as the gates. We need to stop them destroying it.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll manage.”

Without thinking, Ikai put his hand on the horn he carried at his waist.

“And that horn? You’re not going to call retreat, are you? We’re not going to retreat!”

“It’s just in case…”

“Just in case? I don’t like the sound of that. We’re not going to retreat, either we take the capital or else we die here.”

“Take it easy, remember I’ve already been through this in my own Boundary.”

Burdin eyed him in annoyance. Then he snorted.

“All right. You always know what’s going to happen. If it’s just in case, well, so be it.”

“Thanks, friend. I hope I’m wrong, but if I’m not, we’ll need it.”

“You’re the Liberator. I follow you.”

Burdin was beginning to move forward toward the battering ram when a horn sounded the alarm behind them. At once the warrior glanced aside at Ikai, who shook his head.

“That wasn’t me.”

Both of them turned to face the sound. The horn rang again with an urgent shrillness.

Burdin strained his neck to find out what was going on. “The southern watchers are signaling danger,” he said.

“Can you see anything?”

“Nothing in this damned rain!” roared the warrior.

He stood on tiptoe and stretched further.

“Careful!”

A deadly rain of arrows fell on them. Ikai leapt to protect Burdin’s back and covered him with his shield. The missiles reached several men around them. Two struck Ikai’s shield.

Burdin turned with a snort of relief. “Thank you.”

“You look after my back and I look after yours,” Ikai said with a wink.

A new wave of arrows fell on them. The shields did their job, but every time more warriors were hit: some wounded, some never to get up again.

Ikai looked up at the sky and saw that the heavy rain was thinning to drizzle.

“The storm’s subsiding.”

“In that case it’s time to take the walls.”

The horn rang out again, this time with clear urgency. They turned to face south, and then they saw it. An enormous army of the Guard was advancing in their direction.

“Hey, what’s this?” cried Burdin. “Where are they coming from?”

“It’s a trap,” Ikai said, sounding resigned.

“It can’t be. They couldn’t have left the city.”

“They haven’t left it. They were never inside. They’re the reinforcements from the county capitals.”

“Hell! I thought we’d disbanded them! I was sure they’d all run away!”

“They’ve prepared a trap. While our army’s divided, attacking the four walls, they’re coming to attack us from behind, where they can hurt us most. Here, at the gates of the city.”

“The treacherous snakes!”

The men around them turned to see what new threat was coming upon them, then prepared to defend themselves. They began to take up their formation behind Ikai and Burdin. The battering-ram stopped its advance toward the gates. The men pushing it ran to join the others.

The enemy army was advancing determinedly and rapidly. More than fifteen thousand men, well trained and equipped, were on their way to bring death to them.

“What do we do?” Burdin asked urgently.

Ikai took a good look at the enemy army, then at his own men. He looked to east and west, where the warriors were already attacking the walls, and thought for a moment. Burdin and the rest of the men awaited his orders tensely, their eyes on him, their hands clasping their weapons. After

an instant which seemed an eternity to those brave warriors, he turned and took a step toward the enemy.

“Liberator…” Burdin insisted.

All eyes were fixed on Ikai.

“We’ll do the opposite of what they expect,” he said calmly, as if the enemy army which was almost upon them did not cause him the slightest concern.

“Your orders,” Burdin begged, now in great haste.

“Burdin, listen to me carefully. You have to pull down those gates. It’s the only chance we have.”

The warrior’s eyes turned first to Ikai, then aside at the enemy army. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely sure. I’ll deal with them.” He waved toward the enemy. “You take charge of the battering-ram and bring those gates down. If you don’t do it, we’re all dead.”

Burdin’s gaze lingered on him for a moment, then he made up his mind. “Right. Lurama wants me to follow your orders and that’s what I’ll do. Wolf-Warriors, to the battering-ram, with me!”

Ikai watched them go. As soon as they reached the siege weapon a new volley of arrows fell on them.

“Good luck, my friend.”

“Liberator, they’re coming,” said one of the warriors beside him nervously. Ikai took stock of the men and women with him: they were not warriors, he had been left with the farmers. The warriors were fighting by the walls.

“Stay calm, all of you. Form into three lines behind me.”

They obeyed at once. He counted some three thousand people with him.

“Listen to me carefully. I want you to dig your legs firmly into the ground. Flex the support one, hold fast with the other. Shield up, spear and sword to the front.”

The frightened rebels followed his orders.

“What are we going to do, Liberator? There are so many of them,” another man said.

One of the women, copper-haired, cried: “Fight, like the children of the highlands we are!”

“Let’s finish off those traitors! For our children!” yelled another woman, with blonde hair.

Ikai smiled. Those women really had guts.

“What I need,” he said to the women, “is for you to keep up the line. Don’t fight, don’t advance or run in any direction. Hold fast as if you were a wall.”

“We don’t attack?” asked the copper-haired woman.

“No, we hold fast. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“So what do we do?” shouted Ikai in a voice which expected an answer.

“We stand!” they all shouted back.

Ikai faced the arriving enemy who were almost on them and reached for the horn at his waist.

“This is the ’just in case’ moment.”

He rang the horn three times, then withdrew behind his warriors.

The army of the Guard reached them and crashed against the human wall he had prepared.

“Hold fast!” he ordered his people.

The crash caused numerous casualties among the rebels. But they withstood. Like the wall of a dam, they contained the enemy flood. The Guard put pressure on the defensive line, but the rebels did not yield a single foot. They did not retreat, did not break their lines. The soldiers pressed and pressed, trying to break the lines and get to the battering-ram and Burdin’s men. But for a short but invaluable time, they were delayed. The men and women of the lines were sacrificing their lives to prevent the avalanche and protect the rebel rearguard.

And that was what Ikai needed. To gain the time needed for Burdin and the ram to reach the gates of the city. And for something else, something the enemy did not expect. Behind the army of the Guard, silently, by surprise, there appeared the forces which had been attacking the northern wall of the city. Or more exactly, two-thirds of them. He had only sent a third of his forces to take the north wall. The other two he had hidden in the forest,

waiting, just in case they were needed. *It's wise to remember the past and learn from it,* he said to himself remembering the ambush his people had fallen into when they had attacked Sesmok's armies, and how his sister Kyra had saved them by appearing from under cover of the mist at the last moment. He remembered it well, and that was why he had prepared that counter-measure, for history tends to repeat itself. And this day it had done just that, in another place, with other people, but with the same result.

The line of defense was finally overcome. They fell before the superior numbers. A dozen enemy soldiers attacked Ikai. Calmly he clasped Adamis's disc in his hand, focused, and used the Power. Before the incredulous eyes of the soldiers his body began to turn translucent. He became ether, as if he were a spirit, and disappeared in front of them.

The soldiers had no time to react. Behind them the rebels were falling upon them. The enemy army tried to swerve and face the surprise attack, but it was too late. The warriors of the Highlands charged at them with menacing howls and terrifying roars, and began to cut the soldiers to pieces like wild beasts of the mountains.

Ikai went up to the fallen and discovered the dead bodies of the two women who had supported him so bravely. The copper-haired woman had died as she thrust a knife into a soldier's throat. The blonde woman lay beside her with a spear in her stomach.

The horror of war. I'll never get used to it. And for my own good I hope I never do, that it always makes my stomach turn and my soul shrink back. For a moment he watched the fierce battle, then walked to the battering-ram. He was no longer needed here; the enemy army had fallen into a counter-ambush and was already doomed.

Burdin was moving forward with his shield held high: surrounded by a thousand fellow-countrymen, under a rain of arrows. Behind him came the ram and the brave warriors pushing it. The arrows found their targets among the rebels, but Burdin would not yield. He came to the city gates and made way for the ram to reach them.

"Get it into place! Quick!"

The first thrust of the siege weapon came at once. The gates shook but did not yield. It was followed by a second and a third. The doors shivered, but held.

“Come on! Give it all you’ve got!” he cried to his young warriors.

Spears rained on them from the battlements. More than half of them fell dead.

“Hell! Replace them!” he shouted to his men. Immediately new warriors took the place of the fallen and the ram hammered at the gates once again.

He appeared beside Burdin, who pointed to the battlements They were now throwing down rocks and spears.

“They’re tearing us to shreds,” the warrior said.

“I’ll deal with them,” Ikai said, and closed his eyes. He summoned the Power, and the disc rose above the palm of his hand. It gave forth an almost transparent flash, and he pointed his finger at the battlements above his head. From his finger there came a thread of mist which rose to the parapets. The thread extended, becoming a fog, which spread throughout the battlements above the gate. *Denser, more solid*, he ordered the disc, and the mist turned into thick fog. The soldiers found themselves wrapped in a cloak of fog which prevented them from seeing a finger’s-breadth in front of their noses.

“By the three Goddesses!” exclaimed Burdin.

Ikai pointed to the double gate. “Let’s seize our chance.”

“Pull down the gates!” Burdin cried to his men. “All at once, come on! Shove! Shove! Shove!”

The battering-ram hammered on the door ceaselessly to the rhythm Burdin set. The soldiers on the battlements were shooting at the rebels but with no visibility, in the midst of the fog, their aim was uncertain.

At last, with a tremendous crash, the gates gave way.

“Yes! Forward!” yelled Burdin, and crossed the gates followed by a thousand warriors.

Ikai put the horn to his lips and sounded five calls. This was the signal they were all waiting for. The rebels abandoned their assault on the walls and hurried to the gates. He looked over his shoulder and saw, arriving behind him, the warriors of the ambush. Like an overflowing dam they came into the city: thousands of rebels, in search of that longed-for freedom.

The fighting inside the city was brutal and chaotic. The defenders tried to push back the assailants from the battlements, taking advantage of their position. But the men and women of the Highlands were fighting as if possessed by the spirits of fierce beasts. The walls were covered with the red fluid of life. Inside, at the far end, Ikai saw the great Monolith of the Gods. It rose imposingly, threateningly, to the skies. The divine artifact was identical to the one in the Senoca Boundary. Ikai shivered.

In the streets of the city, skirmishes between Guards and rebels were breaking out. The Guard, overwhelmed by the tide of rebels, were withdrawing to the innermost part of the city, to the main square of the capital. Ikai looked around for Burdin and found him leading the assault on the great square. The warrior was shouting orders to his men. To the north of the square, behind the great Monolith, Ikai saw a huge stronghold with a number of adjacent buildings with regal walls and high towers. The soldiers of the Guard were retreating toward it.

“What’s that building?” he asked Burdin.

“That’s the Regent’s fortress. He’s barricaded himself in there with the nobles, and his last forces.”

“It’ll be hard to take.” He clenched his fist hard. “But by the Gods, we’ll do it!”

Unlike Sesmok’s palace this was not showy and built for the glory of its occupier, but a military construction. And Burdin was right, it would be very hard to take. *Different men, different ideas… even though they serve the Gods in the same way.* He studied the situation: the rebels had taken the battlements and the southern and central parts of the city. There remained only the fortress and the northern part of the capital. Thinking of that area of the city, a shiver ran down his spine.

“Call a meeting,” he told Burdin.

“A meeting? Let’s take the fortress!”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“But we’ve already got them!”

“No… it’s a trap. The fortress is the bait, and you’re about to swallow it whole.”

Burdin looked at him in perplexity. He was about to protest, but snorted in acceptance and relaxed.

“Right then. If you say it’s a trap… then most likely it is one. What do you want us to do?”

“Call for a meeting. I want all the men and women here, in the square, ready to attack the fortress. But you must control them. Don’t let them attack, no matter how anxious they might get. Or else we’ll all die.”

Burdin’s eyes opened wide. “By Mother Earth, I don’t understand a single thing! But I’ll do what you say, Liberator. Because I trust you, and because I know you’re something out of the ordinary. I can’t explain it, and I don’t want to. But I accept it.”

For several hours the rebels continued to arrive from all parts of the city to assemble in the great square and its surroundings, awaiting orders. Thousands of men and women gathered together restlessly. The order to attack did not come.

“And what now?” Burdin asked. “Are we going to besiege them?”

“No. Now we need ropes. Long, strong ones.”

“Ropes? I don’t understand a thing!” the warrior growled. With a wave of despair he left to carry out his errand.

“And nobody must attack, or else we’re lost.”

Burdin stopped. He turned to Ikai, shook his head and went on walking.

“Nobody’ll attack unless I give the order.”

He did not take long with the ropes. A hundred Bear-Warriors were helping him, but they all looked annoyed.

“I know you want to take the fortress. But trust me.”

“I trust you, brother from another land,” Burdin said. “And they follow me.”

“I appreciate it, Burdin.”

“What else do you need?”

“Now I need two thousand of your Bear-Warriors, the strongest of them.”

“I like the sound of this a lot better. A surprise attack force? Are we going to climb the stronghold?”

“No. I need brute force.”

“By the Sun Goddess! I’d give an eye to know what goes on in that head of yours!” he protested, and went to get the men organized.

By the time everything was ready it was already dusk. Ikai commended himself to Oxatsi, Mother Sea, and prayed she would save those good people. He sighed deeply and gave the order.

“Heave!”

The two thousand Bear-Warriors heaved with all their might. They heaved on the ropes that were tied around the great Monolith of the Gods.

“I don’t understand why we’re wasting time on this.”

“You soon will, my friend.”

At the third heave, the monolith shook. And suddenly, the whole ground began to shake as though an earthquake was taking place. But it was no earthquake, it was something much worse and more lethal. From the northern part of the city close to ten thousand Enforcers appeared at a run, spears in hand, their ominous helmets shining under the touch of the sun’s last rays. There was a funereal silence in the square. Nobody spoke. Everybody was speechless with fear.

“No… it can’t be…” muttered Burdin. “We’re dead.”

“Not yet. We have to bring down the monolith.”

“The monolith?”

“Believe me. Make the men heave harder, with everything they’ve got!”

Burdin turned to the warriors. “Heave! Heave! Bring the lot down!”

The men heaved. The Executors were coming toward the square, their spotless armor and their red capes foreshadowing the blood of the people they were about to shed. The bloodthirsty spears led the way.

“Heave! Bring it down!”

The rebels confronted the Enforcers. But even for that brave people of warriors, the physical and lethal superiority of the Executors made itself manifest. The Enforcers immediately cut their way through the rebel forces, leaving a trail of dead bodies in their wake.

“They’re coming here!” shouted Burdin.

“They’re trying to stop us pulling down the monolith,” said Ikai.

“Come on, sons of the Highlands! Show your mettle! Bring it down!”

And Burdin’s men heaved and heaved, while the Enforcers dealt death on their way to them. The rebels tried to hold them back, but they were unstoppable. The first Executors reached the men who were pulling on the ropes. Without a sound they began to deal death around them.

And there came a massive cracking sound. It was followed by a second.

The monolith tottered. And fell. The rebels ran for cover. The artifact struck the ground with a tremendous crash and shattered into a thousand dark crystal pieces. For a moment they were all held still, rebels and Enforcers alike. Watching what had happened, as if time had stopped.

Burdin reacted. “Everybody to arms!”

“It won’t be necessary,” Ikai told him. Taking him by the arm, he led him to the first of the Executors, who was standing motionless, looking straight ahead.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy? Defend yourself!”

“They aren’t a threat any longer,” Ikai said, and went to stand in front of the Enforcer. All the rebels watched him in awe.

“The Gods use the monolith to control the Enforcers. Without the artifact, the Enforcers are left waiting for communication. And it doesn’t reach them anymore. Now they’re like broken toys.”

“By the three Goddesses! Unbelievable!”

“Don’t kill them. Surround them and take them to prison.”

“You heard the Liberator!”

Ikai’s orders were carried out at once. It was pitch dark by the time they managed to take all of the Enforcers away.

“And now do we take the fortress?”

“No, my friend. Now we make camp and we wait for them to surrender. There’ll be no more fighting. You’ve won. It’s only that the Regent hasn’t realized yet. If we’d attacked the stronghold, the Enforcers would’ve destroyed us. It was a good trap. That was the Regent’s plan. Now he’s surrounded by thousands of enemies and he’s alone. He’ll surrender. Give him the time he needs to realize.”

“I’d attack and tear his head off. But we’ll follow your orders.”

“Thank you, Burdin.”

“How did you know about the Enforcers?”

“Because I’ve already lived through it…”

“…yes, I know, in your Boundary. Even so, I don’t understand. It’s as if the goddesses spoke in your ear and told you how to get out of every situation. You’re special, Liberator, very special.”

“Don’t you believe that.”

“How long do you think he’ll take to surrender?”

Ikai stared up at the stronghold. “I don’t know the man, but I’d say no more than five days.”

On the evening of the fourth day, the Regent gave himself up in exchange for having his life spared.

Three days later, beside the fireplace in the deposed Regent’s bedroom, Ikai was warming body and soul. It had been a great victory. Everything had come out according to plan. He still could not explain how, but they had done it. He had worked out the strategy very carefully based on what he had learnt, and tried to anticipate their rival’s movements. But he also knew that at the end of the day, no matter how much one had thought, planned and foreseen, there were no guarantees of success. The best of plans might go irreversibly wrong in the blink of an eye. *Thank you, Mother Oxatsi, for looking after your son, and for saving these good folk, who are not your people and worship other goddesses, but whom you protected just the same.*

While he took comfort he recalled all the time passed in that Boundary, more than three long years, of planning, devotion, fighting and sacrifice. And what in the beginning had seemed to him impossible, they had managed to achieve. They had succeeded in bringing down the Regent and freeing that people of strong, proud men and women. *I hope the others have had the same good fortune.* This thought made his stomach tighten, for it had been a long time since he had had any news of Albana, Kyra, Maruk and Idana. He wished with all his heart that they might be safe and sound, but somehow he doubted it.

All of a sudden the bracelet on his left hand vibrated. He stretched out his arm and stared at it. Adamis had had it made by his Erudite Notaplo. It was a very special artifact, which allowed him to communicate with the people of the Highlands without needing to understand their strange language. The bracelet translated the foreign words in his mind, and when he spoke, he merely had to think a moment in advance and his mouth pronounced the words he meant to say in these people's language perfectly, without his knowing how he did it. And according to what Kyra had told him it would allow him to hear the Gods' own mental messages, which was something he had not yet had a chance to prove. But the bracelet was something more than that, something much more important: it allowed them to communicate among themselves across great distances by using the Power of their discs. But its use had been forbidden, since the Gods might intercept the communication, trace its origin and locate them. And that would sentence them to death. The five carried one of the communication bracelets, and a disc, but they had agreed not to use them to get in touch unless they found themselves in imminent danger of death.

And now his disc of Power had just given out a flash. Someone was trying to communicate. And that could only mean danger of death. Anxiety clamped on to his chest like an iron claw, so that he could hardly breathe. Was it Albana? Kyra? He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. He stretched both arms, the bracelet visible on his left wrist and the disc in his right hand palm. The bracelet vibrated again and the flash from the disc was stronger in response. An image began to take shape in front of him, faint, blurred, as if enveloped in a gray mist.

He half-closed his eyes, trying to make out who it might be, but it was impossible. He waited a moment and the image became more definite. He made out a figure hiding behind a tree. It wore a hooded cloak which did not allow him to see its face. Which of the four was it? Beside the figure's knee, on the ground, there was something red. Blood! His heart began to beat furiously. The image finally became clear. The figure pushed back its hood and revealed its face.

"Maruk!" Ikai cried.

A message reached his mind.

I need help. The situation's serious. Something very sinister is going on here. It's beyond my understanding. I don't think I'm going to make it. If I

fail, know that I've tried with all my being. For Liriana.

The image turned blurred an instant, blinked and vanished.

"Maruk! No! Wait!"

He tried to reconnect with Maruk using the disc and the bracelet, but was unable to. He thought of contacting Albana and Kyra. But if he did, he would be endangering them. Maruk's message was a request for help. He would have sent it to all of them. *No, I mustn't make contact, I'd be exposing them to an unnecessary risk. We all know where Maruk is and what he was trying to do.*

Two knocks on the oak-wood door made him turn. He put away disc and bracelet.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and Lurama came into the room with Burdin.

"How do you feel, Liberator?" the High Matriarch asked.

"Recovered. Thank you for the room, I'm more than grateful for the warmth from the fire."

"It's the least we can do for our hero," she replied with a friendly smile.

"I'm not a hero, or a liberator either. You are, and so are your people."

Burdin stepped forward, "Of course you are!" he thundered.

"And of course our people are too," Lurama put in.

"I've seen you do unthinkable things," Burdin growled, "and at first I didn't like them at all. But what you've done for us, has been… has been… as if you were possessed by the spirit of the three goddesses. And no, I don't want you to explain, I don't want to try and understand it, it's enough to know you're with us, you're one of ours. You're like a brother to me now, a Bear-Warrior from other mountains, possessed by the spirit of the Moon Goddess." He went up to Ikai and gave him a great bear-hug, lifting him off the floor as if he were made of straw.

"Very well said, Burdin," Lurama said, with a nod of approval.

Burdin left Ikai on the floor and Lurama in turn went to him. She gave him a heartfelt hug and kissed his forehead.

"We would never have done it without you, Ikai."

“The People of the Highlands are strong and proud. You’d have managed to do it someday.”

“Maybe, but not like this. We owe you our lives, not only our own, but those of all the many thousands who would have perished had you not guided us in battle. I’m an old woman, and the years teach you to think and recognize things. And to be grateful for them too. You came and you joined us as one of our own. You lived among our people and you showed us the way. You’ve led us to the freedom we so yearned for. There are no words to thank you with. I didn’t believe I’d witness it, I didn’t believe it would be in my time. For all this you have my most sincere gratitude, and I give it to you on behalf of all my people whom I represent as Matriarch.” She raised her hand to her heart.

Lurama’s words moved him.

“Thank you… I came to help you… I’m glad and satisfied that you’ve gained your freedom. That’s been my wish ever since I came.”

“And now? What are you going to do? Will you stay and go on helping us?”

“I’d love to, Lurama, but I can’t. I must leave.”

“You’re leaving?” Burdin said, looking concerned. “Where to?”

“I have to help one of my own people, a friend. He’s begged for help.”

“Where is he? Is there anything we could do?” Lurama offered.

“He’s in the Boundary of the House of Fire.”

“I understand. Trying to do the same as you were here…”

“That’s right. I must go in search of him and help him. My work here is done.”

“Very well. If you must leave, ask for whatever you might need. I’ll be sorry to see you go, this old leader has grown fond of you.”

“And this Bear-Warrior too,” Burdin said. “Do you want me to go with you and guard your back?”

“Thanks to both of you. No, Burdin, you must stay here. There’s a great deal to do, and they need you.”

Burdin nodded. “It’s true, the work is piling up.”

Ikai’s gaze lingered on them a moment. They represented the wisdom and ferocity of that brave people to perfection

“The day will soon come when I’ll send for you,” he told them.

“And we’ll respond,” Lurama said.

Ikai raised his hand so they would listen and understand what he was asking.

“I’ll summon you so that together we can confront the Gods. It’ll be near-suicide, but it’s the only way to gain lasting freedom. I’ll summon you when all have united to face the Gods.”

“We’ll come,” Burdin assured him. “We owe you a debt of blood.”

“When the day comes, you can count on the People of the Highlands,” Lurama said.

Ikai saluted them with respect and affection.

“My thanks to you both. I’ll leave at dawn.”

“May the three goddesses go with you,” they said.

I’ll be needing that.

Chapter 6

Kyra urged her piebald horse uphill with her heels. Swift Deer was waiting for her at the top, gesturing to her to hurry. Lone Wolf and Quiet Spirit were following close behind her. They had been riding non-stop for hours, following the Chief.

“One who walks two worlds, quickly!” urged Swift Deer.

Kyra stopped her horse beside his and took a close look around her. To her surprise, the landscape was very rocky in that particular area. Great red stone formations with narrow passages between them stretched before her eyes for several leagues. Surrounding that strange phenomenon were the steppes.

“My people’s warriors are waiting, hidden in the center,” he said.

“It’s a curious place, this. I wasn’t expecting to find red rock in the prairies.”

The Chief pointed to the east. “We must run,” he said.

She looked in that direction, but all she could make out were a dark spot and a dust cloud coming closer.

Lone Wolf sat tall on his horse. “Guards and Enforcers,” he announced. Kyra could not see anything clearly, but she trusted him to be right.

“Treason,” Swift Deer said.

“We’d better hurry and warn the warriors,” Kyra said.

Lone Wolf glanced at Kyra and Quiet Spirit. We won’t make it.”

“Because we’re women?”

He did not flinch at this. “Because you’re not good riders. And I wouldn’t get there in time. It would be too much weight for my horse.”

Kyra turned to Swift Deer. “But you can reach them and warn them, can’t you?” she said, hoping for agreement.

The Chief stared at the enemy, then at the rocky pass in the distance, and nodded.

“Then go and warn them!”

“I’ll warn them of the betrayal and we’ll fight.”

“No,” Kyra ordered him. “You won’t get involved. You’ll go to the meeting point.”

Swift Deer’s eyes flashed with anger. “They have to pay for the death of White Owl and the other Chiefs. We’ll fight them and win. The spirits of the steppes are with us.”

“My heart begs me to do the same thing as you want to, but my head tells me that this isn’t the moment. Believe me, there’s nothing I’d like more than to confront them at your side, with your warriors, but that’s not what we must do. We must go to the meeting point, by the great river. That’s where the forces of Crazy Cougar of the Sixth County and Silver Eagle of the Fourth are waiting for us. Trust me, it’s what we must do.”

Swift Deer clenched his jaw hard and swallowed the rage which was visible in his eyes.

“You are one who walks two worlds. White Owl followed you. I follow you. I’ll do what you say.” And without another word he galloped away toward the rocky formations.

They watched him ride at breakneck speed until he was lost in the distance.

“Good choice,” Quiet Spirit said to Kyra with a smile.

“Every day I’m more like my brother. At this rate I soon won’t recognize myself.” Kyra smiled as she looked up at the sky. “Thank you brother, for your teachings and your example.”

“And now what?” asked Lone Wolf.

“Now you must guide me to the meeting point. It’s time to set the Children of the Steppes on the path of war.”

Days later, sitting with her back against a tree, Kyra was resting in the midst of the war camp. At last she had managed to sleep for a good while, and her body seemed to have regained some energy. The last two weeks had

been true hell. She had fought in three battles against the troops of the Guard. Three bloody victories in their advance from the south to the capital with the joint forces of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Counties.

Lone Wolf dropped down beside her and fell asleep at once without a word. With every passing day Kyra was growing to appreciate these remarkable red-skinned people. They were bloodthirsty savages, but they were also noble. They lived by and for the steppes, in harmony with the spirits, which according to them every living creature possessed. They also worshipped and respected animals. They were certainly very different from the Senoca. She scratched her wrist, above her communication bracelet, and thought of using it. *I'd give my right arm to know that everyone's all right, that Adamis is all right.*… But she knew she could not risk it, least of all now that they were at the height of the revolt.

She glanced at her other wrist, at the accursed Ring. They still all wore it, since they needed it to get into the Boundaries: if they were to try crossing without one they would die. Adamis, working together with Notaplo, had offered to try to find a way of freeing them from the Rings, but the ill-omened objects were a golden artifact which was both powerful and well-designed. Not even Notaplo had found an easy way of getting rid of them. She sighed deeply. Thinking of Adamis had brought on a feeling of great yearning. She remembered the time they had spent together since the liberation of the Senoca, a very difficult time but also a very happy one. She leaned against Lone Wolf's shoulder and allowed herself to be carried away. And she remembered those days.

"Have you contacted him?" she had asked Adamis.

Sitting in a chair a few steps from his bed, barely able to keep upright, the Prince-God raised his head towards her. On his face was an expression of intense pain which he was doing his best to hide.

"Yes, Notaplo will deal with it. Do not worry."

"You take too many risks."

Adamis shook his head. "It is Notaplo who is taking risks. If my father found out he is helping us…that he is helping the escaped rebels, he would have his head cut off. Or something worse."

"Notaplo is a great man. A good man," Kyra said, thinking affectionately of the wise old man.

“And the best Erudite among the Golden. In any case, here in the home of the Witch of the Lake the risk is less. The temple is protected. They would not be able to trace any communication to this place.”

“I can’t tell whether you’re telling me this because it’s true, or to stop me worrying.”

Adamis smiled. “Both. There is no need to worry. Above, on the surface, the use of the Power is identifiable, traceable. Down here, on the other hand, it is far harder to pick up. That is why my people build underground temples. They do so to hide what is in them, and the use which is made of the Power in those places, from the other Houses.”

“And I thought you were a funereal, deeply gloomy race.”

“That too, I cannot deny it. But the reason the temples are built underground is to hide both them and their inhabitants. Like this one, for instance.”

“What Adamis is telling you is true,” the Witch said as she came into the room. “That’s why they’ve never found me, even though I make use of my Power here.” She no longer wore the mask in the shape of a tree over her face. Kyra had found out many things about her and her group, the Children of Arutan, during the time they had shared in the hidden temple under the lake. The old witch’s name was Aruma. Her face was kind, and the golden hue of her skin was now almost entirely ochre as a result of her great age. Her soft gray eyes shone with undeniable wisdom. Her character on the other hand was the opposite: often she behaved like a spoilt child, even as though she were not all there. This bewildered Kyra, who had grown fond of her.

She poked her tongue out at Adamis. “The more I learn about you all, the less I like you,” she said. She was trying to cheer him up by all the means she could think of, because although he constantly concealed the fact, she knew he was in terrible pain.

“Have they managed to get Notaplo’s monolith to work?” Aruma asked with a giggle. “A brilliant idea of that Erudite, though a bit crazy in my opinion.”

Kyra turned to her. “The monolith is finished, and according to what Idana told me, it works! All thanks to Notaplo!”

“And to the Children of Arutan,” Adamis said to Aruma with a small bow. “They are the ones who have managed to raise and activate it, let us not forget.”

“I haven’t forgotten it. They terrified our people when they appeared to help. Luckily Ikai was able to handle the situation. Half a dozen Gods, appearing from nowhere, just like that… it was a shock.”

“There wasn’t much option,” Aruma said. “Adamis is an invalid, and I’m too old and crazy for this task. I had to entrust it to my brothers. It took me a while to find them and convince them. But it worked. Who’d have thought it? Men and Golden working hand in hand, for the same goal, as allies. Something unthinkable.” She giggled. “Mother Nature must be overjoyed.”

Kyra shook her head. “I’d never have imagined it either. She shook her head. “Now, with the monolith active, we can hide from the Gods. The Senoca have disappeared from the face of the earth.”

“Yes. No Golden will be able to see you or perceive you as long as you all stay within the area of the protective boundary.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure there isn’t a single Senoca crazy enough to go outside into the open.”

Aruma nodded. “He’s very intelligent, that brother of yours. I was surprised by his plan: it was well thought-out and unexpected. Yes, he has a good head, that young lion. I’ve always liked him.”

“Plan? What do you mean?” Kyra asked in puzzlement.

“The exodus of the Senoca. I expected you to go far away from here, but I always assumed you’d go toward the sea, to your Mother.”

“And so we did, in the end.”

“Yes, but the most logical choice would have been to go east; the sea’s just a few days’ journey from here. We’re on the edge of the continent, at the extreme east. But your brother went west, to the center of the continent, and then he headed south, until he reached the sea. A good move: the Golden searched for you all along the east coast and part of the northern one. But they never thought you’d go in that direction. A very good move.”

“It was very hard, we lost many people during the journey. But Ikai was convinced it was the only way to make them lose our tracks. And in the end, he was right.”

“Your brother’s a good leader. He’s done very well. And he has you to help him. The fact is that you never cease to surprise me.” Aruma gave her usual giggle.

Adamis wrapped himself closer in his blanket and could not hide a grimace of pain. “Anyway, we must prepare for the worst. They will find us, sooner or later, and sooner or later there will be a confrontation. We must be ready. I must be ready.” The Prince-God tried to stand with the help of a staff Aruma had made for him, but was unable to. He remained sitting in his chair.

Kyra hastened to help him.

“No, please. Let me do it myself.”

“But you can’t, my love, let me help.”

“I know you do it out of kindness, but your help makes me feel useless.”

“You’re not strong enough. You need more time. You shouldn’t try to stand yet,” Kyra said, her voice full of concern.

Adamis glanced aside at the marble bed a few steps away, then at the chair he was sitting in.

“Nearly a year, and all I have managed to do is get out of bed and drag myself to this chair.”

“You’ve done a lot. And you’ve suffered terribly to get this far.”

Adamis shook his head, and making an effort he tried to stand. His face became a mask of pure suffering. He held back a grunt of pain. Before Kyra could hold him up he fell to the floor and lay there, unable to move.

“Adamis!” Kyra cried, as she tried to help him.

Her heart broke every time she witnessed his efforts to recover. Every day he tried, tiny fractions in silence, without a single complaint. And every day he managed to regain a pinch of the energy the poison had stolen from him. During those first days, the hardest ones, when he could only move his neck and his body lay dead, he had made her a promise: someday he would go back to being what he had been. Every day he struggled to do so. And although the pain he suffered was abysmal, he would never give up. Never. But the inhuman punishment he was inflicting on himself worried her. She was afraid that one day he might go too far, and either his body or his mind would end up breaking irreversibly.

Aruma glanced at Kyra out of the corner of her eye. “We need you alive, Prince of Ether,” she scolded him,

“I am no good in this pitiful state,” Adamis replied. With a great effort he sat down in his chair again.

“The Children of Arutan need you. Men need you. So stop punishing your ill-treated body, which is barely alive. Or else I’ll have to spank you like a disobedient child.”

Adamis smiled. “And you would, I have no doubt.”

She gave a mocking laugh. “Of course I would,” she said, looking pleased with herself.

Kyra, grateful for her intervention, smiled at her fondly. The wise leader left them alone.

“Promise me you won’t over-exert yourself.”

Adamis took her hands in his. “You know I love you more than life, and that I will do whatever you ask.”

“I’ve already lost you once, and I couldn’t bear to lose you again. I won’t ask you not to try, I know that’s against your fighting spirit, but be careful. Your body won’t take it.”

“Thank you for not stopping me,” he said, gazing at her with love in his eyes. “I will be careful, I promise.”

And for months he tried and tried, struggling every day against the pain, falling back broken on to the bed every night, holding back tears of suffering and rage. But he kept fighting until in the end he was able to walk. Kyra was there to help him every step of the way, suffering with him, witnessing his pain and the incredible strength of his will-power. She now remembered those difficult days with intense nostalgia, for it had been three long years since she had been able to hold her beloved in her arms.

And she fell asleep remembering, while night fell over the war camp. Lone Wolf covered her with a blanket.

“Thanks,” she said, and fell into a dream of past, happier times, alongside her beloved Adamis.

Dawn brought the cool of the steppes, and as soon as the sun rose the whole camp was on its feet, getting ready for that decisive day. It was time for the final battle.

“The Chiefs wish to speak to you,” Lone Wolf told Kyra.

She woke up and saw her bodyguard already on his feet, prepared and armed to his teeth.

“It’ll be best if you don’t let me die in today’s battle,” she replied, her eyes on the steady bustle of warriors and horses all around her.

“That won’t happen,” the warrior said with absolute certainty.

“It’s the moment of truth. Today we either take the capital or we die.”

“You won’t die as long as I’m alive.”

Kyra smiled. “You’d better do that, otherwise I’ll come back from the spirit-world to haunt you.”

“I bet you would.”

“Have you told Quiet Spirit how you feel?”

Lone Wolf stiffened. “I… well… I gave her a mare.”

“By Mother Sea! Is that how you go courting here? You gave her a mare? You didn’t throw in a few hens to make it more romantic?”

Lone Wolf’s face lost its color.

“You might be the best warrior in the whole steppes, but it’s pretty obvious that what with all you say and how well you go courting, you’ll never leave any children behind you.”

Offended, the warrior snorted in disgust, turned his back on her and left.

She smiled. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Quiet Spirit beside a tent. She had heard everything. The girl came over to her.

“Bring him back to me alive, one who walks two worlds.”

Kyra nodded. “I will. Don’t you worry.”

“And when he’s back I’ll take over the courtship myself,” the young Masig said, and winked at her.

Kyra laughed. She hugged Quiet Spirit and went off to join the Chiefs.

They were waiting for her, sitting in a circle on the ground. Behind them, guarding them, stood their champions. She greeted Silver Eagle, Swift Deer, Crazy Cougar and then the other Chiefs. Those of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Counties were there too. She sat beside Silver Eagle, who welcomed her with a wide smile on his wizened old face.

“Welcome, one who walks two worlds,” he said.

She nodded and returned the smile with genuine affection. This man had taken her in like a daughter and had become a real father figure for her during the time she had spent there.

“Everything is ready,” Crazy Cougar said.

“And the warriors await the order to ride,” Swift Deer added.

“Very well,” Kyra said. “Today we’ll achieve what we’ve been after for so long. Today we’ll fight as brothers, all of us riding united over the prairies in search of our freedom. We’ll defeat the oppressor. Have no doubt, and follow me, I swear that today the People of the Steppes will be free.”

“We’ll follow you!” cried Swift Deer.

“For freedom!” Crazy Cougar shouted.

The rest of the Chiefs joined in the cry for freedom.

“To battle!” said Kyra.

The Chiefs joined their warriors and mounted their horses. Kyra whispered in Silver Eagle’s ear: “What about your plan?”

The old Chief gave a slight nod. “Ready.”

“I hope it works.”

“It will,” he assured her.

“When it comes to thinking, I’m not as good as my brother. That’s why I trusted you with this.”

“This old prairie fox has lived through a lot. Don’t you worry, it’ll work.”

Kyra smiled at the Great Chief and hugged him tightly.

“Don’t you get near the fighting,” she warned him. “Lone Wolf and I will lead your warriors. Please. Your people need your wisdom, not your old war spear.”

Silver Eagle turned to look at his warriors as they prepared for battle. They were young and strong, fighters raised on the harsh prairies. He smiled at her.

“You’re right. My arm’s not so strong any more, but my mind still is.”

“Thank you, Great Chief,” she said, and hugged him once again.

Lone Wolf came to Kyra and offered her a spear and a bow and quiver. She looked into the warrior's eyes. He was offering her the same weapons the warriors of the tribe would carry into battle.

"You know I'm not able to wield your weapons."

"You are one who walks two worlds. You are one of us. You will carry our weapons to battle."

Kyra had never heard him say so many words at once.

"I appreciate the thought," she said, a little overwhelmed.

He pointed behind him, where several thousand warriors were waiting on their mounts.

"Now to battle," he said.

"To battle!" Kyra yelled.

Chapter 7

There came a strident whistle, and Albana opened her eyes abruptly. For a moment she thought she was with Ikai in the shelter. She focused her gaze and saw several bodies with pale green skins asleep beside her. No, she was not in the shelter, she was a very long way away from it. She was in a village built in the tops of giant trees, however unreal it might seem. She would have sold her soul to be with Ikai that morning, or any morning. His absence hurt her every dawn, with a bitter pain. At nighttime, though, it became sweet with the hope that someday not too far in the future they would be together again. And every day that went by meant that the longed-for day was closer.

The dwellers of the hut began to rise and stretch. The first rays of the sun entered through one of the glassless windows of the family dwelling, built of branches, leaves, moss and mud, which stood on two enormous branches. In that world there was no glass, nor many other commodities which other, more advanced civilizations enjoyed.

“Good morning,” Ilia greeted her in the characteristic sing-song accent of the People of the Trees.

Albana pressed her bracelet. It had been failing, and without it she could not understand a word of what those strange green-skinned people were saying.

“And to you, though I’d kill whoever it is who wakes us up every morning with that unbearable whistle,” she replied once the bracelet had translated what the girl was saying.

Ilia smiled. “Soon, very soon. Be patient.”

“My patience is running out, and you know I’m the sort who likes to get to the action,” Albana said in a tone which suggested she was determined.

“I know, that’s why I’m asking you to hold on a little longer. We’re almost ready.”

“I’ve been holding back for a long time, too long,” she said, with frustration in her voice. “I think I’ll be able to hold on a bit longer, though.” She gave the girl a wink and a wry grin.

Albana ate some fresh fruit while the remainder of the family prepared to go down to work, as they had to do every morning. She looked at her reflection in a clay bowl of clear water and noted that her camouflage was holding. To hide her from indiscreet eyes they had covered her whole body with something green, some kind of resin mixed with herbs, which when dry gave her the skin tone of the People of the Trees. But she had to be careful not to let it wear off and reveal her white skin.

“Preparations are going as foreseen. We’ll rise up very soon and what we so much wish for will come true.”

Albana gave a roguish smile. “It had better, or else I’ll start the subversion myself,”

“Trust me,” said Ilia.

“I do.”

And in fact she did. There was nobody she trusted more in that Boundary. This race was wild and primitive, far more so than the Senoca, and treachery was common. She had already witnessed it first-hand. When she had crossed the barrier of the Gods and reached the tribe she had been welcomed first with friendly greetings, then with knives and arrows. She should have foreseen it: what could anyone expect of savages with their faces painted black, dressed in loincloths and moccasins? She almost did not survive to tell the story, and she still had a scar on her back from a treacherous knife as a reminder.

Thanks be to the heavens, Ilia had appeared at the last minute to prevent more bloodshed. She was the daughter of the Chief of the tribe and was considered a princess. She took her in and welcomed her. Ilia, who had a quick mind and an observant nature, listened to everything Albana explained to her: why she was there, her mission, the Gods, the other Boundaries, and how to gain freedom. To Albana’s surprise, since she had not expected much from those tree-dwellers of the endless forests, half-naked savages, Ilia believed her. Not only that, she put her in touch with the subversive elements who had been at work for some time, although in a disorganized and chaotic way.

“Come on, we have to go down. The Shaman and his guards will be checking the houses soon.”

Albana put her head out of the window. “He’s on his way already, the swine.”

They left the hut, and she avoided looking down. It was something she never did, since they were in an elevated village built amid gigantic trees, thousands of years old and more than a hundred and twenty feet tall.

She followed Ilia and her brother Pilap. They were walking at ease along the platforms and swaying catwalks amid formidable branches and lianas, as if living in the top of a tree at an appalling height above the ground were the most natural thing in the world. Albana, on the other hand, had to struggle with the vertigo the height gave her. She had it under control now, but every once in a while she still felt it and it was a deeply horrible feeling.

The other dwellers were coming out of the huts among the giant branches. They were green-skinned men and women, the men with shaven heads, the women wearing simple strips of leather over their private parts. They walked on those unsteady surfaces which swayed above the void, immune to the height and able to move almost as skillfully as primates. They were loaded with their working tools as they made their way down: axes and hatchets to fell trees in the case of the men, baskets for the gathering of fruits, berries and edible roots in the case of the women. Every morning the whistle sounded and the whole tribe had to leave the village in the trees and descend to work in the woods. That was the law of the Gods.

Albana looked to her right and saw two young men on a wooden platform. They seemed to be arguing about something, but she could not hear what it was. She had the feeling that the conversation would soon escalate and go from words to shouts, then to something more. She was not wrong. One of the youngsters was yelling at the other, who gave him a violent shove. The victim took two steps back, steadied himself and pulled out a knife without a second thought. The other did the same. They stared at each other with hatred in their eyes, flexed their knees and started circling around each other, looking for the chance to be the first to strike.

“Ilia, you’d better impose some order here. Two of the young men are about to cut each other open,” Albana said, not without a trace of admiration. She liked this race. True, they were savages, but their blood was

hot and they never backed down, not before anybody, not before anything. And that was something she respected.

Ilia stopped and turned to see what was going on. “I’m coming,” she said.

The two young men exchanged several strokes and cuts, and without Ilia’s intervention things would have ended badly. *Yes, I like these green savages, I must admit they have guts and they don’t let anybody take advantage of them.*

They went on, with Albana hurrying. She had to go down with them because the village was subject to search, and if she were found out she would be in serious trouble. Ilia handed her a colossal liana.

Pilap laughed. “Come on, sluggard.”

Albana poked her tongue at him and began to descend. Pilap went in front of her, smiling, with his cousin Lial following him. She always enjoyed descending from that unthinkable height. It was exhilarating.

Pilap went down at dizzying speed. Albana could not follow for fear of losing her grip and ending up flattened on the ground. She envied those people’s skill. Even using her Power she could not compete with them in their habitat. But gradually, over time, imitating her hosts and practicing a lot, she had managed to develop a couple of new skills which were sure to come in handy in the future. One of the most interesting mysteries of the Power was that it allowed new abilities to be created through experiment and practice. This was like honey for Albana, something delightful. There was nothing she liked better than developing a new skill through the use of her Power. The Golden barely went in for experiments; they were content to use the more efficient and powerful skills developed by their Erudites. All for fear of growing old and dying prematurely. But she was a hybrid with power, and as a human the power had no side-effect on her: it did not make her age. And so she experimented with it as often as she could. Unfortunately developing a new skill was a difficult, demanding business. But the reward and the feeling of triumph when she managed it were unequaled. She had taught Ikai and Kyra how to experiment, and she hoped they would do it as often as they could.

Lost in her own thoughts, she stepped on another young man’s foot by mistake as she reached the ground. Without a word, and before she could

even begin to apologize, the man turned and pushed her with all his might. Albana took advantage of the shove to somersault and land back on her feet as if nothing had happened. She looked at the young man defiantly. He and his friend pulled out knives at once.

“You’re not exactly friendly, are you?”

“Are you laughing at us?”

Albana thought of replying sarcastically, but she knew that if she did so she would have to kill those two men. It was early in the day and these two, savages though they were, were too young to die like that.

“I’d only laugh at the Shaman,” she said, and took out her two black daggers.

The reply disconcerted the young men. Nobody confronted the Shamans. That meant going against the law of the Gods, and it carried the death penalty.

Pilap stepped in between and gestured towards Albana, knife in hand. “She’s with me.”

The two youngsters lowered their gaze. “If she’s with the Chief’s son, she’s with us,” they said, and left with heads bowed.

“It wasn’t necessary, Pilap.”

“I know. It was just in case.”

Albana winked at him fondly and sheathed her daggers.

“Besides, I want to go on competing with you. I know you’ll never beat me at climbing down the liana,” he added with a laugh.

Ilia’s younger brother was seventeen springs old, strong and athletic. But most of all he had a good heart, something Albana had noticed at once. It was an uncommon quality in a place where brute force and savagery reigned over goodness. Ilia, two years older, also had a good heart, but in her what stood out most was her intelligence.

“Every day I get closer, ugly,” Albana said. “The moment your attention slips, I’ll overtake you.”

He flexed his strong, nimble arms. “That won’t happen, whitey,”

“Don’t brag so much,” Lial said, and pushed him.

Pilap grinned. “If you weren’t my father’s brother’s daughter, you’d see.”

“Oh yeah, look how I’m shaking.” She aimed a kick at him.

Lial was quite the tomboy, both in looks and in behavior. A year older than Pilap, she was always with him, daring him at every step. And on some occasions she even beat him. They competed over everything, from who could climb the highest and fastest to who could fight better with knife and axe. But most of all, which of them had the best aim with the bow. Their camaraderie was unshakable, and they had adopted Albana as one of the family, which was something she was deeply grateful for.

Albana looked up at the lush landscape around her. She was awed afresh. Before her rose the tallest and most massive trees a human being could ever imagine. There were thousands of them, spreading to make a forest of incredible beauty. All that Boundary was an unfathomable forest, something which had utterly surprised and amazed her. The Gods had decided to exploit the resources of the endless forest where the People of the Trees lived. The landscape was overwhelming; each tree was of unbelievable size. The base of the trunk alone was bigger than a house, and in many cases they were over a hundred and eighty feet tall.

The first time she saw them those green and brown giants impressed her so much that she was left speechless, unable to react. From what she had learnt about them they were thousands of years old, and the green-skinned People worshipped them.

She put her hand to her eyes and looked up towards the crowns of the trees. There, more than a hundred and twenty feet up, were the villages. These were built around the massive trunks, using the huge branches for support, joined together by catwalks of wood and rope. Most of the tops she could see were inhabited, so that a multitude of bridges, platforms and lianas joined the trees to each other. The huts, built on the branches and platforms, housed the families.

She sighed. She had been living among them for a long time, and though she was used to it all by now, she was still fascinated. Living in villages built in those majestic trees seemed quite fabulous to her, as well as a tremendous achievement on the part of its inhabitants. That entire world had an awesome beauty. The green which reigned everywhere was

dreamlike, the air cool and filled with jungle fragrances which enchanted the senses.

From high in the trees came the men and women to produce for the Gods. In that area there were three villages, and hundreds of people were willing to serve the Golden. According to what Albana had seen, the socio-economic organization and structure of that Boundary was very like that of the Senoca. The territory was divided into six counties, with the capital in the center. Enforcers, Proxies and the Guard operated in the same way as in her old Boundary. There were hundreds of villages in each County, the only difference being that these were all high above the ground. The difference was in the hierarchy within the villages themselves. In each there was a Chief and a Shaman. The Chiefs were the ancient leaders and the Shamans, the religious guides, had gained power with the aid of the Proxies. *That way they can control this whole savage people better. The Chiefs don't have power any more, and the Shamans make sure they rule the villages. And they have them subjugated on a basis of blood and terror. But all that's going to change.*

"Form into groups!" came the order from a Guard. Behind him a Proxy waited, together with another dozen Guards. To Albana it was shocking to see green-skinned Guards wearing armor, as opposed to their working brothers who went half-naked. The men separated into two large groups, the women into three. She followed Ilia and joined the third group.

The Guard pointed to the east. "Men, group one! Tree-felling!"

There was a rumble of complaints, which grew stronger.

"Tree-felling! The Gods command it!" shouted the Proxy.

For the People of the Trees, cutting the forest to collect timber or to clear space for crops was sacrilege. The greatest of sacrileges. Killing the forest meant killing the soul of the people. This was something which the Chiefs rejected, but which the Shamans now defended. The order to fell trees went against everything they held to be true. For them the forest was sacred and had to be protected at all costs.

"Sacrilege!" one of the men in the first group suddenly called out.

"Who said that?" the Proxy asked.

"I did," said a young man. He was not more than twenty years old, strong and determined. He took a step toward the Proxy. "It means killing

our soul."

The protests grew among the other men, and the Guards tensed. The Proxy was about to speak when the village Shaman appeared, followed by three guards.

"I'll take care of this." he said.

He stepped forward, and Albana had a sudden feeling of something ominous. The Shaman wore a long robe, entirely covered in gigantic many-colored feathers. On his head he wore a mask with a huge beak which hid his face. Every time she saw him she felt the desire to tear the mask off, along with his head. But there was no way she could do anything of the sort. Everything had already been set in motion, so that one false move meant their plans would fail.

"The Gods order us to gather the fruits of the forest to feed them and allow them to build their great eternal city," the Shaman said.

"What Gods, what eternal city?" the young man countered.

"The Golden Gods whom we serve, and who must be obeyed at all times. Their wishes are law for our People."

"All I see is green-skinned men, Shamans and Proxies, who order us to destroy our sacred home. All I see is sacrilege. Father Forest will punish us for turning against him."

"Father Forest is a false god. The true Gods are golden as the sun and his immense power. You have seen their servants…"

"Yes, those monsters with helmets on their heads, more Monsters than men."

The Shaman waved his arms, shaking the feathers of his ceremonial attire. "As long as we follow the law of the Gods, they will allow us to live in peace and grow as a people. But if we refuse their demands, they will descend upon us and destroy us. No one will survive. No one,"

"Listen to your Shaman," the Proxy said. "He respects the law of the Gods,"

"The Shaman doesn't serve his people, he's betrayed us."

Ilia, who was beside Albana, could not hold back an anguished cry.

The Shaman went up to the young man until his mask was in front of his face, but the young man did not flinch and kept his chin high.

“The Shaman is the law in the village,” the Shaman said. With his left hand he threw some silver dust into the air. The young man’s gaze turned aside to follow the dust, and with a swift movement of his right hand the Shaman cut his throat with his ceremonial knife.

“Nobody may defy my authority and live. I serve the Gods, I am their voice.”

The body of the young man collapsed on to the ground. Several men took a step toward the Shaman, who turned and threw some red substance at them. On contact with their skin the poison penetrated their bodies, and the men never got as far as laying a hand on him. They fell to the ground, writhing in pain. The Guard surrounded the Shaman to protect him. The other men protested, but dared not do anything.

Albana was about to step forward, but Ilia grabbed her wrist.

“No,” she whispered. “Stay where you are. There’s too much at stake.”

“He’s holding your father in prison and he’s a savage murderer,” Albana muttered in her ear. “We’ve got to kill him.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why we can’t take the risk now. He’ll get what he deserves. I’ll give it to him myself, for what he’s done to my father, for what he’s doing to our people. But we can’t do it now. We have to follow the plan.”

Albana bit her lip and made an enormous effort to hold back the rage she was feeling.

“All right. But tell me when and I’ll gut him.”

Ilia nodded and let go of her wrist. The protests died away. All of them knew the punishment for standing up against the Gods’ wishes: their throats would be cut.

“First group of men, get ready for felling!” came the order again.

Reluctantly, a few at a time, they set off.

“Second group of men, to the hunt!”

After that came the women’s orders. The first group was to gather fruit, berries, roots and tubers, anything in the forest that might be edible. The second was to go to the great river to fish and to trap small animals: mainly hares and squirrels. Squirrels were a delicacy for those people, something Albana did not understand. And the third group was to till the fields ready

for sowing. It all broke their hearts because they were killing the forest to produce crops. *Everybody producing for the Gods. Produce or die. The invariable maxim whatever the Boundary, no matter how different their people may be. But that's already changed for the Senoca, and with a bit of luck it'll change for the People of the Tress too. I'll make sure it changes, as sure as my name's Albana.*

Chapter 8

Seated on her horse, Kyra gazed from the south at the distant city. Unlike the one within the Senoca Boundary this capital was not rectangular with four high stone walls and stone buildings inside. It was circular, with a low wall around it. Most of the buildings within it were really conical tents, very similar to those of the tribes, although much bigger. Toward the northeast of the city more robust buildings could be seen, with the Regent's great palace to the north. *The nobles and the rich merchants and their palaces. That's still the same*. The giant monolith of the Gods, too, was the same. The artifact rose impressively toward the sky in front of the Regent's palace.

"So similar and so different."

Swift Deer came up beside her. "The city?"

"Yes, though the basic design is the same."

Lone Wolf urged his horse forward until he stood on her left.

"Enemies."

Kyra and Swift Deer followed his pointing hand. The gates of the city had opened and a long line of mounted soldiers were streaming out.

Kyra did not know what to make of this. "Are they coming out to fight?"

"We fight on horseback. Warrior to warrior," Lone Wolf explained, as if this were a creed.

Kyra considered the wall. It was not very high, though high enough to prevent the horses from jumping it. At the same time it did not look very strong.

Swift Deer pointed with his spear. "They're the soldiers of the Guard. They're taking up their positions in front of the city. They think we'll be afraid and run away. They don't know what's coming to them."

"We'll tear them to pieces." Lone Wolf said with conviction.

Kyra was trying to find a logical explanation. “Why don’t they defend the city?” she asked. “Why are they throwing away the advantage the walls give them?”

The two warriors looked at her in surprise.

“You can’t fight inside the city,” Swift Deer said.

“There’s no room for horse and rider,” said Lone Wolf.

“Then why don’t they fight on foot to protect the wall?”

The two men exchanged looks of perplexity and shook their heads.

“Only a coward or a low-born fights on foot,” said Swift Deer, patting his horse’s neck.

“Fighting on foot is an insult, something base,” Lone Wolf added.

Kyra bit her lip.

“The traitors of the Guard believe themselves to be superior to us. They’d never lower themselves by fighting un-mounted,” said Swift Deer.

“You never cease to surprise me,” said Kyra, and smiled. “The more I know you, the more I like you.” She half-turned on her horse and looked back. Forming an endless line, more than thirty thousand warriors on their piebald horses were waiting for the order to attack. The scene was overwhelming. The warriors of the fourth, fifth and sixth counties, faces and arms painted in red, armed with short bows and light axes, watched the Guard as they took up their positions on the distant plain.

“They’re waiting for the order from The One Who Walks Two Worlds,” Swift Deer said.

Kyra longed to launch the attack. The innate fury that had been part of her all her life was struggling to emerge from within her and seize control of the situation. The enemy was there in front of her, and behind them the capital. Freedom was within touching distance. *Stay cool, take it easy,* she told herself as she analyzed the situation the way her brother would.

“I don’t see the Enforcers. Where are they?”

“They’ll be waiting inside the city,” Swift Deer said.

“Messengers are coming,” said Lone Wolf. He pointed to the north. Three riders were galloping like lightning towards them.

Kyra raised her clenched fist. The warriors behind her understood the order to wait. The messengers reached her.

“Message…” the first one said, panting from the effort so that he could barely speak.

“What’s going on to the north? Is everything okay? Are the warriors of the first, second and third counties ready?”

The messenger nodded and swallowed.

“Everything’s as you requested, One Who Walks Two Worlds.”

“Very well,” she said, and turned to Swift Deer. “How many soldiers of the Guard can you count?”

“About forty thousand. They’ve all taken up their positions.”

“Then the time to attack has come. Give the order, Lone Wolf.”

The warrior sat up erect on his horse. Putting his hands to his mouth, he mimicked the howl of a real wolf. A deep abandoned howl which in the reigning silence spread throughout the warrior ranks. Immediately several of them responded with new howls. And these were followed by others. Coyotes joined in, and thousands of throats howled to the skies.

Kyra asked for a spear. Swift Deer offered her one.

“You know what you have to do, don’t you?”

“Yes, don’t worry,” he said.

“Don’t get caught up in the madness of the battle. At my signal, do as we planned.”

“I won’t fail you.”

Kyra nodded and turned to the warriors. She raised the spear to the sky, then pointed it at the enemy.

“To battle!” she cried at the top of her voice.

Thirty thousand warriors broke into a gallop, shouting and howling as though possessed by evil spirits, against the forces of the Guard. Kyra hurled herself after them. When the Guard saw the enemy charging, it too charged in response. She had never experienced anything so spectacular. More than sixty thousand horses galloped over the prairie towards a fatal encounter. The sound of the galloping piebald horses created an overwhelming din, as if this were some tremendous earthquake, and an

enormous cloud of dust rose in their wake. The yells and howls of the warriors added to the general racket.

The thrill of the moment overwhelmed her. She rode hunched over her horse, trying to concentrate in the midst of the uproar. She had to half-close her eyes to protect them from wind, dust and her own fiery hair. At full gallop, the two forces clashed in the midst of the prairies outside the city. The cries now gave way to ones of fury and pain. The warriors fought with the rage of the oppressed, the Guard with the despair of those who know the next moment might be their last. The battle turned frenetic. These were not Senoca, they were harsh, battle-hardened warriors of the steppes who knew how to fight. Axe- and spear-strokes were accurate and powerful. The riders were thrown down and finished off mercilessly before they could remount or bring down another rider from the ground.

Searching for Swift Deer, Kyra found him surrounded by his most faithful warriors, opening up a gap in the forces of the Guard. *Come on Swift Deer, don't fail me now, remember the plan.* Further to the east she saw Crazy Cougar and his warriors opening up another gap. They fought as if possessed by the spirit of an enraged bear. To her right there appeared a rider from the Guard, charging with his spear in front of him. The metal tip was aimed straight at her chest. An axe flew past her eyes and a powerful impact broke the wooden spear. Immediately a second axe buried itself in the rider's chest and toppled him from his horse.

"I look after you," Lone Wolf said with an axe in each hand. Riding his horse bareback, he seemed the warrior spirit of the prairies themselves.

Kyra thanked him with a nod. The fighting was growing fiercer all the time; warriors and Guard were fighting in a chaotic tangle and very soon everything would be complete chaos. *Come on, Swift Deer, don't get carried away by the blood.*

Lone Wolf dispatched another rider with two sharp strokes of his axes. "Look," he said.

Kyra straightened on her horse and saw Swift Deer and his warriors abandoning the fight to run north.

"Let's go with him!" cried Kyra.

Lone Wolf gave the signal to his people, and all the warriors of his county followed him at once. Crazy Cougar saw the maneuver and ordered

his own warriors to follow Swift Deer's.

The riders of the Guard were taken aback by the sight of the warriors fleeing. This was something unthinkable; a warrior never abandoned the fight, since it meant a dishonor they could not live with. But before their astonished eyes, all the warriors were fleeing northwards. It took them an instant to react, since the officers could not believe what they were seeing. Then they gave the order to pursue.

Kyra rode at top speed, glancing back over her shoulder to see what was happening behind her. The Guard was pursuing them. Her horse was going so fast it seemed to be flying across the plain. All around her, warriors were fleeing on horseback. The Guard was trying to catch them, but their mounts were slower. They left the city behind and headed in the direction of a hill in the distance. Swift Deer, at the head of the group, began to slow down. The warriors followed his example. Kyra glanced over her shoulder again and saw that the Guard was coming closer. Then she looked ahead and saw the wide hill they would have to go up. The Guard would catch up with them on the way up. She turned to her right and saw Lone Wolf. The warrior nodded at her in reassurance.

They reached the foot of the hill and began to ride up it, but the Guard were already upon them. Suddenly Swift Deer stopped, and all his warriors with him. He raised his fist and turned his mount to face the Guard. At once all the other warriors stopped their flight and turned. All except Kyra. She was looking toward the hilltop. Swift Deer made his way to the head of his warriors and withstood the charge of the Guard bravely. Kyra did not take her eyes off the top. *Where are they? They should be there already.* But nobody appeared. *We led them into the trap. Come on, show yourselves!* She was expecting to see the forces of the three other counties who were waiting behind the hill. But nobody appeared at the summit.

And the Guard fell upon them. The warriors drove back the attack amid cries of rage. But now the Guard had the advantage and wreaked havoc among the front lines of the warriors, who were overwhelmed. Swift Deer and his champions fought like wounded animals. There was no way out. They could not escape; the hill prevented them and the Guard had penetrated deeply among the lines of warriors. All that remained was to fight like wild beasts or die. Cries of pain and fury mingled with the

neighing of desperate horses. The air tasted of earth, and they could barely breathe amid the dust that rose above the battle.

Kyra pressed her horse and forced him up to the top of the hill. The poor animal snorted in complaint but managed to do her bidding. *What are you waiting for? Where are you? We need you!* she thought in anguish. What she found on the other side of the hill turned her to stone. The warriors of the First, Second and Third Counties were fighting for their lives against an army of Enforcers. Eyes wide, she watched the terrible scene. *That's why they never came to the ambush of the Guard. We've been betrayed!* The Enforcers, fewer in number but far more adept at dealing death, were fighting from silver carriages drawn by a pair of horses against the warriors on their piebald mounts. Although the warriors were causing casualties with their short bows and spears, the fight was too unequal. The Enforcers were too strong, too lethal. The rebels would not leave there alive. *Hell! Where did they get those carriages from?*

She turned to see what was happening on her side of the hill and found that the situation was just as critical. A chaos of riders, mounts, blood and death whirled before her. *They're going to rip us to pieces!* When she saw her people fighting against the Guard her distress turned to fury. A fury she knew well and which she had learnt to control. But now was not the time to hold back. Now it was the time to let it all out. *I've tried your way, brother, but it hasn't worked for me. The plan was good, we'd thought it all through, but it didn't come out the way we expected. Now we'll do it my way. Wish me luck*, she thought, gazing at the sun. She turned her horse, faced the battle, and cried:

"For freedom!"

She charged downhill, carried on by a volcanic fury. Lone Wolf saw her and went to stand at her right to protect her. Crazy Cougar went to her left so as to protect her other flank. The three of them went into the thick of the battle, like a giant sharp-pointed arrow propelled by enormous force and speed. Kyra, with Adamis's disc round her neck, was using her Power to bring down anyone who dared cross her path. Lone Wolf and Crazy Cougar dealt death to left and right, the one with his two light axes, the other with his spear and buffalo-hide shield. Seeing that they were beginning to make a way through the lines of the Guard, the warriors joined the three to form a triangle of death.

“Follow me! For freedom!” she cried.

A great shout followed her own. The officers of the Guard were yelling orders to deal with Kyra and the arrowhead of the attack. She was using her spear to focus her power, so that any enemy she pointed it at and who was less than three steps away was thrown against those around him. The soldiers tried to kill her, but Lone Wolf and Crazy Cougar defended her fiercely. They went through the enemy lines like a knife through butter. The warriors, infected with their leaders’ courage, began to tilt the battle in their favor.

“Now, all together!” cried Kyra, cheering on her followers.

And they reached the enemy officers. She immediately recognized the Commander of the Guard by his elegant white-and-silver armor. *Now you’re mine.* But before she could use her Power against him, the Commander threw his spear at her with all the force of a trained arm. The spear came straight at her heart, where in raising her own spear she had uncovered her breast. She tried to protect herself, but she knew it was too late. She leaned to one side of her horse and saw the spear in the air. At the same moment Crazy Cougar leapt on top of her and the spear buried itself in his side. Kyra lost her balance and clung on to her horse’s neck as Crazy Cougar fell to the ground. Two officers charged against her at their Commander’s order. Lone Wolf slipped in between, and with a lethal show of skill finished them before they could reach his protégée.

Kyra looked back and saw Crazy Cougar on the ground, dead. Roaring with rage, she fixed her gaze on the Commander.

“You swine! You’ll pay for this!”

The Commander unsheathed his sword and spurred his steed towards her. But this time she was able to catch her enemy’s aura, and focused on it. She used her Power. The Commander rose from his horse and hung in the air ten feet from the ground.

“I am the spirit who walks two worlds!” Kyra shouted.

At this unheard-of sight, everyone around them stopped fighting, warriors and soldiers alike.

“This is what happens to those who oppose me!”

With a sudden twist of her hand, she broke the Commander’s neck.

Nobody was fighting around her. They were all watching the scene in absolute astonishment in the case of the warriors, or terror in that of the Guard. She moved her hand again and let the dead Commander's body fall. The reaction was not long in coming. The soldiers of the Guard started to flee in panic.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" she cried. With another wave of her hand she raised a wall of solid fog in front of the soldiers. The horses, terrified, refused to go through it. Unable to control their mounts, the soldiers fell to the ground. The warriors started towards them, but she stopped them with a gesture.

"Nobody touch them!"

At her order all the warriors stopped and stared at her.

She turned to the soldiers. "Listen to me well, all of you! This is Swift Deer." She indicated the Chief. "Now he's your Commander. Those of you who wish to live will follow him into battle. Those who wish to die: say so now and I'll grant your wish." Her tone of voice was so convincing that it left no room for doubt.

There was a silence, followed by a subdued murmur that grew in intensity. The soldiers started to approach Swift Deer, a few at first, fearful of their fate. When the others saw they were unharmed, they all followed them.

"That's better. Now we go up this hill. On the other side our brothers are fighting against the Enforcers. We're going to join them. Between us we'll defeat the Enforcers."

"We'll follow you, One Who Walks Two Worlds!" Swift Deer said.

"Forward! For freedom!"

Like a horde of wild animals, the warriors and the soldiers of the Guard reached the hilltop and descended upon the Enforcers. Kyra rode at their head, with Lone Wolf on her right.

Kyra pointed her spear at the warriors who were fighting against the Enforcers, and whose numbers were shrinking with every passing moment. "Swift Deer, help them!"

"Onward, for the steppes!" cried Swift Deer, and took both the soldiers of the Guard and the warriors of his own county with him.

Kyra made a sign to Lone Wolf and went straight towards a group of Enforcers who were watching the battle from a little distance away. These were the Eyes-of-the-Gods in their light carriages, who were directing the battle. When they saw the warriors were charging towards them they sent Executors in heavy carriages to intercept them.

“Lone Wolf, deal with them!”

The warrior glanced at her and shook his head. He did not want to leave her unprotected.

“Do as I say! It’s our only chance!”

Lone Wolf cursed under his breath and nodded. He raised his arm to call his warriors after him and swerved to face the Executors who were approaching to cut off their advance. Kyra seized her opportunity and turned the opposite way in a wide arc so as to dodge the Executors, then charged against the Eyes.

The fighting turned frantic. Swift Deer and his men were trying to help the warriors of the first counties who were being decimated by the Executors. The furious cries of the warriors and the full gallop of the horses buried the lethal silence of the Executors and the heavy advance of their carriages. Lone Wolf and his men howled to the sky. The warriors, with their piebald mounts, far faster and agile than the heavy carriages, were trying to get close enough to them to attack and move away before being stabbed by the spears of the Executors. To get close to one of them meant death, whether by the power of an Executor or the impact of the carriage.

“Attack and move away!” Lone Wolf shouted. “Don’t get near the carriages!”

Kyra faced the Eyes-of-the-Gods. She was now very close to them. There were a hundred or so. When the first of the group saw her galloping alone towards them like a suicidal lunatic, they watched her in puzzlement. She smiled. *Gotcha! Time to die!* She caught the aura of the first three Eyes. It was an ochre aura, unmistakable and corrupted. They started to react. Kyra clenched her fist round Adamis’s disc at her neck, concentrated and used the Power. The three Eyes were hurled backwards with massive force, a product of the rage she was feeling. They crashed into the ranks behind them and toppled a dozen of the Eyes. The others reacted and took out small discs to use against her.

“You won’t stop me!” she cried, and created the defensive sphere around her body.

The Eyes used their discs. Thirty electric charges hit the sphere. But it held. She gasped with relief. But it would not be able to withstand another attack. She had to do something. She was almost on them now. But there were too many to defeat a few at a time. The discs shone in the gloved hands of the Eyes. And she had an idea. *I’ll use their own weapons against them!* She stopped her horse ten paces from the group and stared defiantly at them. She waited for the Eyes to discharge against her again, then used her Power. She focused on the discs, on their flash as the power was summoned, and with an effort of concentration greater than anything she had managed before, sent the charges aimed at her back against the Eyes who had launched them.

There was a loud blast of thunder, then the discharges shook the Eyes. With shrill moans, the ones which had been hit by the energy fell dead from their carriages. But she was unable to redirect all the attacks. A dozen of them reached her and destroyed the sphere. She and her horse fell, struck by the last of the discharges. Her horse died amid terrified neighing. She lay convulsing on the ground in inhuman pain. She grasped the disc at her breast and put it to the ground. The energy flowed out of her through the disc, and evaporated as it touched the ground.

She was badly wounded, unable to move. Her whole body was in immense pain. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a dozen carriages advancing. *I didn’t manage to finish them all.* She tried to defend herself, but she had another seizure and Adamis’s disc fell out of her hand. The carriages surrounded her. She was about to die. She looked for Lone Wolf, but he was too far away, fighting against the Executors. She tried to rise but was unable. She lay there helpless on the ground. Her mouth tasted of earth and blood.

“Your time has come, bitch,” came the shrieking voice of one of the Eyes.

A war cry thundered suddenly. Kyra raised her head from the ground and saw Silver Eagle and thirty warriors charging against the Eyes-of-the-Gods. She could not believe her eyes. They were all aged warriors, charging in a desperate attempt to save her.

“No, Silver Eagle!”

The Eyes turned and attacked. There was a crash, shouting and more discharges. Then came silence. She realized that a number of bodies were falling on top of her. Pain punished her again, and she lost consciousness.

“Kyra! Kyra! Come back!”

Kyra opened one eye. She felt intense pain. Her whole body was in agony. She glimpsed Lone Wolf, who was wrapping her in a blanket.

“Lone Wolf…”

“You finally return from the world of spirits.”

“What..? What… happened?”

Swift Deer came into her line of vision. “We won.”

“How?”

“The Eyes. Once the Executors were dead they didn’t know what to do and we were able to kill them a few at a time. Our steeds are swifter and more agile than their carriages.”

She remembered what had happened. “The Eyes…Silver Eagle!”

She looked at Lone Wolf, and he lowered his gaze. “I’ll take you to him.”

He gathered Kyra in his arms and carried her to where the Great Chief was lying on the ground, all his dead warriors around him. But he was still breathing. Lone Wolf placed her on the ground beside the Great Chief.

“Silver Eagle, why did you do it?”

“For you… for my people.”

Looking at his wounds, she knew there was nothing they could do. The Great Chief she loved as a father was dying.

“They will all remember your sacrifice, what you did for the People of the Steppes,” she said.

“Let them tell my story… to the children… at night around the fires…”

“It shall be done,” Lone Wolf said solemnly.

Kyra stroked the blood-smeared forehead. “They’ll all know it was the Great Chief Silver Eagle who united all the tribes against the oppressors. They’ll all tell the story that Silver Eagle saved their people at the last moment with a heroic charge. They’ll all remember that they gained their freedom because a great man fought all his life to unite the tribes and lead them to freedom, sacrificing everything in the process. They’ll know, you have my word.”

“And mine,” said Lone Wolf.

“Lone Wolf…”

“Yes Great Chief.”

“When I’m gone… you’ll guide our tribe.”

Lone Wolf shook his head. “I’m just a warrior.”

“At my death… you’ll be Great Chief.”

Lone Wolf sighed, bent his head and accepted.

“The spirits are coming for me… I see a great eagle…”

“Farewell, Great Chief,” Kyra said, and kissed the old man’s cheek lovingly.

Silver Eagle spread his arms wide, as if receiving the spirit that was coming for him, and died.

Kyra rose slowly to her knees, her eyes filled with tears, and said goodbye to that great man. The she rose and looked toward the city.

“Lone Wolf, gather the warriors together. You’re going to take the city.”

“The Regent?”

“No, forget about him. He’s finished.”

“And then?”

“You’re going to bring down that accursed monolith.”

Lone Wolf stared at her in puzzlement, his brow furrowed.

“Do you want to bring this to an end? Do you want to be free?”

The warrior nodded, his eyes shining.

“Then do as I say. Pull down that misbegotten artifact.”

“Whatever you order, one who walks two worlds.”

An hour later, the surviving warriors entered the city at full gallop and headed to the great square where the monolith rose to the sky. The palace was fortified, and inside it the high command of the Guard, together with those loyal to the Regent, had barricaded themselves. But as Kyra had ordered, the warriors ignored them.

In front of the monolith, on his piebald horse, Lone Wolf gave the order.

“We have to bring it down! Attach ropes to your horses and pull until it falls!”

The warriors went through the city, house by house, in search of ropes. When they had enough, they tied them to the arcane artifact of the Gods. They mounted their horses and pulled together. For an instant nothing happened, with only the snorting of the steeds audible in their effort. They tugged again, and then there came a strange *crack*. They heaved for a third time, and the monolith broke at the base and toppled heavily. When it hit the ground it shattered into a thousand crystalline pieces.

The warriors were howling and shouting at the sky with cries of joy and victory. Thousands of throats expressed their happiness. The People of the Steppes had achieved their longed-for freedom.

Swift Deer carried Kyra to the square. She was so badly hurt they had to use one of the carriages which had belonged to the Executors.

“What do we do now?” Lone Wolf asked.

“Now you must send four of your fastest riders in the four directions to check whether the whole Boundary fell when the monolith was destroyed.”

The two warriors exchanged a glance of surprise.

“You mean there’s no barrier?” Swift Deer said. “That we’re free?”

She smiled broadly. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“I… I can’t believe it… It’s a dream.”

“Now your people will be able to ride across the steppes, free as the wind. No more Counties, no more Boundary, only endless prairies to ride across.”

“My spirit cannot contain itself for joy,” Swift Deer said, with tears in her eyes.

“And the Regent?” Lone Wolf asked sternly. “And the Enforcers?”

“The Enforcers are harmless now. Without the monolith to govern them they’ll just wander aimlessly like brainless idiots. Capture them and lock them up, all of them. Don’t kill them. It’s not worth shedding more blood. As for the Regent and his followers … lay siege to the palace. Sooner or later they’ll give themselves up. When they do so, execute the Regent, pardon the rest.”

“But… that’s not our law… their throats must all be cut,” Lone Wolf said.

“There have been too many deaths. Pardon them. Believe me, there’s nothing I’d like better than to take the knife to all of them and avenge the deaths of Silver Eagle and Crazy Cougar and all the other braves who died in the battle. There’s a rage in my stomach that wants to reach out for revenge. I can see the same rage in your eyes. I’m finding it fiendishly hard to control it right now because I’d love to let it out and spill a lot more blood. But I believe it would be a mistake. Yes. A mistake.”

“As you wish, one who walks two worlds. We’ll do as you say.”

Kyra sighed and breathed out heavily. Her rage began to fade, and a contained joy at having done what she had come to do took its place. She felt good, very good. The cries and howls of the warriors as they celebrated the victory were now deafening, but they reached her as from a great distance. She felt at peace. Proud of having succeeded, after three long years. *I did it! I liberated the Boundary of the People of the Steppes, just as I was entrusted to do. It’s been a long hard business, something that’s marked me forever, something that’s changed me.*

“And what will you do now?” Swift Deer asked her.

Kyra came back from her thoughts. “Now I have to go and help a friend.”

“You’re leaving us?” Lone Wolf asked uneasily.

“Yes. I received a message from one of my own people. He’s in another Boundary and needs help. I’m going to answer his call.”

Lone Wolf took a step forward. “I’ll go with you,” he said at once.

Kyra smiled. The warrior’s gesture touched her soul. Her eyes moistened.

“No, Lone Wolf. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but you can’t come with me.”

“My mission is to protect you.”

“Not any longer, my friend. Now you have to be a leader. You aren’t a warrior any longer. Now you’re a Chief. You have to guide and protect your tribe.”

Lone Wolf sighed and nodded.

“But I’ll come back,” she assured them.

“We’ll be waiting for you.” Swift Deer said.

“When I return I’m going to ask you for something. It’ll be rather hard, so I need you all to prepare yourselves for it.”

“Whatever it is, we owe it to you,” Swift Deer said.

“I’m going to ask you to join me against the Gods.”

The two warriors stared at her and were silent for a moment, taking in the seriousness and sacrifice this implied.

“We’ll follow you, one who walks two worlds,” Swift Deer said at last.

“All the men united,” said Kyra.

“We’ll defeat the Gods,” Lone Wolf said.

And in this way the fate of the People of the Steppes was sealed.

Chapter 9

Albana was waiting for Ilia, hiding behind the massive root of one of the gigantic trees. Night was beginning to fall. They had all returned by now from another hard day's work in the endless forests and had gone up to rest in the villages in the crowns of those majestic, millennially-ancient beings.

She breathed deeply and spent a moment enjoying the vivid scent of the forest. That night's mission was secret, and she had gone deep into the forest, far from the village, to a small area beside a lake of calm waters.

She could barely see the lights of the aerial village in the distance. It always thrilled her to watch the thousands of lights that lit up at twilight in the inhabited crowns of the trees. She suddenly realized this was not like her, it was a moment of sentimentality, and if there was anything she was not, it was someone who indulged in sentiment. *I'm turning soft*, she told herself reproachfully, and shook her head. She inhaled the wild scent of the forest again, a mixture of damp earth and fresh grass, and smiled wryly.

Perhaps it was the time they had been apart, the three years of absence which had taken her away from Ikai. Perhaps it was living for so long among these people who were savages and yet at the same time honest and capable of deep friendship, even love, if one gained their respect. Which, by the way, was not at all easy. In fact Albana was beginning to feel that her love for Ikai had changed her. She was not as insolent as before, nor did she enjoy making fun of others so much, although she had to admit she still enjoyed it a little. Her heart had softened or mellowed perhaps, and she was not entirely happy about this. She was still herself, lethal, harsh and cynical in her way of thinking. But now, sometimes, she felt a little sentimental.

She remembered the long journey from the Senoca Boundary to the New Shelter after the rebellion. Once again Ikai had shown her how intelligent and determined he was. He had taken all the responsibility on to his own shoulders and been willing to guide their people in a massive exodus to find somewhere they could rebuild and start anew. The journey had taken them

many months of hardship, during which they were buffeted by exhaustion, sickness and death. But Ikai had never faltered, never yielded. Not even in the most desperate moments, not even when everything seemed to be lost, not even when his own people doubted him and came close to turning their backs on him. She recalled how after heading southwest for several months, when they reached the land of the countless lakes the Senoca had decided not to follow their leader any further. They wanted to stay there, to create the new colony in that land of immense lakes. But Ikai never gave up, never showed weakness, not even in those moments of crisis. He managed to convince them to keep going, a little further, toward the south. And they arrived at the place where he had promised to bring his people: beside Mother Sea, far from the Gods, where they would never be found. He had kept his promise. And because of that, Albana could not have loved him more.

"Where are you, my love?" she whispered uneasily.

The night breeze brushed her face and bore some of her fears away with it.

She sighed deeply. "Take care of yourself. We need you. I need you."

He'll be safe, I'm sure of it. He promised to come back to me alive, and he always keeps his promises. The thought comforted her. Ikai would return to her arms. He had sacrificed much for his people; such is a leader's burden. A burden and a sacrifice that had not ended when they founded their New Shelter. For a moment she had thought that everything would be better once they were settled in their new home. And so it was, in part, but not for them, not as far as enjoying their love was concerned. During the next few months Ikai had never had a moment's respite. The building of the New Shelter, with all the endless tasks to be organized, carried out and supervised, swallowed up her beloved, and her too. Days of exhausting work from dawn till sunset, when they collapsed in exhaustion. They barely had a moment to themselves during those hard days, and only at night could they find a short breathing-space to enjoy each other's company, and love each other. *Who would've told me that someday I'd long for those weary days of endless effort? Exhausting days, but happy ones.*

A noise behind her startled her. At once she unsheathed her two daggers and crouched down to conceal herself under the root. She could make out two figures climbing down one of the nearby trees. They used branches and

lianas with the skill of a monkey, but she knew they were human. She used her Power to fade into the shadows.

The two figures reached the spot where she had been a moment before.

“Where is she?” a man’s voice whispered.

“She ought to be here,” said the other voice, a woman’s.

Albana came out of the shadows behind them and with a swift movement drew both daggers under their chins.

“You move and I slit your throats.”

“Wait! Albana, it’s me, Pilap!”

“Turn round, very slowly,” she said. She moved the daggers away from their necks, but kept them raised and threatening.

The two youngsters turned, and she saw they really were Pilap and Lial.

She frowned. “What on earth are you doing here? I might’ve killed you.” She lowered her weapons.

“Ilia told us to reconnoiter the area and warn her if there was any danger,” Pilap said.

“All clear, no spies,” Lial added, indicating the trees around them.

“Good,” Albana said with a smile. “An extra pair of eyes is always useful, even if they’re always in the treetops.”

“You don’t often see anyone on the ground here,” said Pilap.

“Yeah, I tend to forget you’re like monkeys. Especially you, ugly,”

Pilap smiled and flexed his arms.

“We’re like birds, not monkeys,” Lial protested.

“Well, that’s a matter of opinion,” Albana said with a sardonic smile.

Lial crossed her arms over her chest and frowned.

Albana looked around her. “And where’s Ilia? I can’t see her.”

“Well, you won’t if you keep looking at the ground,” Lial said.

Albana squinted and looked up into the treetops. There was almost no light left and she could not make out much, but she could not see her. She turned to Pilap.

“Where’s your sister?”

He pointed upwards. Albana did not understand what he meant, but instinctively followed the direction of his pointing finger. And if she had thought she had seen it all – Gods, Enforcers, monsters, picturesque races – what she saw next unsettled her completely.

Descending from the heavens was a truly gigantic bird. It glided in great circles as it came closer to them. It looked like a colossal eagle, except that it was not. Riding on its huge white-feathered neck was a human being, guiding its flight. Albana rubbed her eyes in disbelief. *It can't be. This isn't real.* The enormous bird was as formidable as the millennial trees of those forests. Comparing the size of the bird with that of the trees, it almost made sense, although her mind refused to accept it. She rubbed her eyes again. The bird glided down to land gently before them. The rider was Ilia.

"Do you like my steed?" she asked Albana casually, as though flying on the back of some kind of monstrous eagle were the most natural thing in the world.

"I… love it," Albana replied. She was still unable to believe what she was seeing.

The bird looked at her with its large eyes, full of intelligence. She guessed that judging by the size of its orange beak and its enormous head and neck, it might very well be able to tear someone to pieces with no trouble at all. Its body was as large as five men together, its claws huge and strong. Suddenly it flapped its wings and raised a draught of wind that made her hair flutter, and she had to cover her eyes with her forearm.

"We call them Flyers. And we call her Happy Flyer. She loves to soar into the skies.

"It takes your breath away."

"Isn't she something?"

"Oh yes. I've never seen anything like it …"

The Bird shook its head.

"Easy, Happy Flyer, she's a friend," Ilia said. She gave a nod of acknowledgement in Albana's direction.

"She doesn't like strangers," Pilap said. He went up to the bird and stroked its beak. "She gets nervous."

Albana, who by now had got over her shock, tried to stroke the gray and black feathers on its breast. Happy Flyer gave a warning croak, and she stepped back at once.

“It takes her a while to make friends,” Lial said with a mischievous smile.

“This is Albana, she’s a friend,” Ilia said to the bird as she stroked its neck. Happy Flyer did not take her eyes off Albana and moved her neck restlessly. It took her a moment to calm down.

“Hi there, Happy Flyer,” Albana said. She came a little closer. The bird eyed her warily but did not shriek.

Ilia indicated the Flyer’s back. “Get up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, she won’t hurt you. As long as I don’t tell her to, of course.” Ilia gave a roguish grin.

“And couldn’t we do it on horseback like civilized people?”

“Horse? What’s a horse?”

Albana put her hand to her forehead. She always forgot that the People of the Trees had no horses. Why would a people who lived in unfathomable forests and slept in the tops of trees need horses?

“Nothing, I didn’t say anything.” She smiled. Carefully she climbed on to the back of the great bird, holding on to a harness made of ropes arranged around the bird’s body.

“Hold fast.”

Albana did so. “And what about these two? Aren’t they coming?”

Pilap looked offended. “My sister doesn’t want us to get mixed up in this.”

“Your sister doesn’t want you to take unnecessary risks,” Ilia put in.

“But you might need us,” Lial protested. She took out her hatchet.

“Let’s hope not. I’m already taking Albana. That should be enough help.”

Pilap was not convinced. “Well, whatever you say, but I don’t agree,” he grumbled.

“Go back to the village and make sure we haven’t aroused any suspicions. Watch the Shaman, but don’t go near him or his men. Understood?”

Both youngsters nodded reluctantly.

“Ready?” she asked Albana.

“I still can’t believe you’ve come down from the sky to pick me up on this gigantic bird. It’s amazing.”

“Ha! Well, if that’s surprised you, you just wait for what’s coming next.”

At Ilia’s command the majestic bird took off, carrying the girls with it. The beautiful animal glided upward with amazing ease. She rose to the skies with complete stealth and rose higher and higher. In the blink of an eye they were already above the giant trees of the forest, and Albana felt an excitement and joy she had not known in a long time. She felt free, truly free, with the sky above and the distant forest below her feet. Lost in wonder, she enjoyed the flight as they glided over the unfathomable forest at an incredible height.

“Awesome, isn’t it?” Ilia asked her with a smile.

The night breeze, impelled by the speed of the flight, buffeted Albana’s face, and she felt a sense of delight.

“Much more than that. Why didn’t you say anything about it to me?”

“It’s a secret. The Shamans have forbidden us even to mention them. They want to control them, they won’t allow anybody to keep them. Before the Gods, the Flyers were my people’s sisters. Each village had several of them, and we lived in harmony. We looked after them and they carried us through the skies.”

“Where are they now?”

“They’re kept prisoners in the county capitals. In chains. They’ve given them to the Proxies.”

“I see. They’ve taken them away from you.”

Ilia made Happy Flyer turn and steered her toward the north.

“They represent freedom,” she went on. “They don’t want the people to have them.”

Albana nodded. Imagining those regal birds in chains, a deep sadness came over her.

“Luckily the Chiefs managed to save and hide some of them. This is my father’s Flyer.”

“She’s free, and your father’s a prisoner…”

“One of the reasons for it is that he refused to give her up. He entrusted me with hiding her, and that’s what I did.”

“Your father’s a good man.”

Ilia stared ahead, and tears ran down her cheeks. Albana knew they were not because of the wind and the speed.

“We’ll rescue him, I promise.”

“Thank you, Albana.”

She made the bird turn again, and they began to glide down.

“Where are we going? Why such secrecy?” Albana asked. Her suspicious instinct was warning her that something important was afoot.

“The day you’ve spent so long waiting for has come.”

“Truly? Do you really mean it?”

Ilia’s voice was firm. “Truly.” She pointed to a dense area of the forest ahead. “We’re almost there now.”

Happy Flyer glided down a little further, then suddenly shrieked and tried to veer to the right. Ilia managed to bring her under control and stabilize her course.

Albana was grasping the harness more firmly. “What’s the matter with her?”

“The barrier of the Gods is very close. They don’t dare go near it.”

“Can they cross it?”

Ilia shook her head.

Happy Flyer shrieked again and tried to fly away, but Ilia imposed her will on her, stroking her neck.

“Come on, my friend, we’re nearly there,” she said,.

The bird glided down, heading towards some trees to the north. Using her powerful claws, she landed on a huge wooden platform between three of the giant trees. It was pitch–black, but Albana’s trained ears could make out the presence of other birds nearby. She reached for her daggers.

“Welcome, Ilia,” a friendly voice said. It was an old voice.

Albana's eyes adjusted themselves to the surrounding darkness. Several warriors appeared, carrying lights: very faint ones that vanished after a couple of steps. She realized they were using glow-worms to create enough light to see. *Surprising but effective. They take precautions.* It surprised her, since the People of the Trees were not exactly given to discretion or stealth. Rather the opposite. It was one of the main reasons why they had not made progress with the rebellion. *It would seem they're learning some stealth at last. Perhaps there's still a chance.*

On one side of the platform she found thirty or so of the gigantic birds, with several warriors tending to them. On the other side were their owners. And these were not just any riders. All their faces were painted and marked with primitive symbols which marked them out as tribal Chiefs. They were sitting on one of the huge branches which crossed the platform, several feet above it. Curiously, or perhaps deliberately, the branch curved on itself to create a shape like a seashell. The Chiefs were sitting in a circle, with one in the center. *I can't believe it. All the principal chiefs are meeting at last. It's what we've been after all this time, and it's been impossible until now. At last there's hope.*

Ilia looked up at the speaker, the Chief in the center, and dismounted. "Thank you," she said.

Albana followed her example, without taking her eyes off the Chiefs. She stayed still. One of the warriors came to take Happy Flyer away.

"Come with us, Ilia, the Council of Chiefs is waiting for you."

She moved closer. "It is an honor, First Chief."

"You are here to represent your father," another chief said. "Those treacherous Shamans have him prisoner. We value his sacrifice."

Ilia went to stand under the branch, and a liana came down to her.

Another chief pointed at Albana with a long curved knife. His face was painted black. "Is this the Foreigner you've been telling us about for so long?"

"Yes, she's the Foreigner, the one who comes from the other side of the barrier of the Gods."

A third chief, whose face was painted red, gesticulated emphatically. "You say her people freed themselves from the Gods. We want to know how they did that. Let her join us."

Albana looked at Ilia, who gave her a sign to come closer. When she reached her side Ilia gestured upwards. Albana nodded back, and the other girl proceeded to climb the liana with perfect ease. Albana shook her head and a smile crept across her face. *They're really like green monkeys. If I told Ikai he'd never believe me.* She followed Ilia, but even with her training as a Shadow and her natural ability she could not manage to climb as fast or as gracefully as her friend.

"Sit in your father's place," said the First Chief. Ilia sat down in a space they had saved for her between two Chiefs whose faces were painted brown and gray.

Albana turned her attention to the Chiefs for a moment. They were tough men; she could see it in their eyes. She noticed they all wore a giant feather from a Flyer on each arm.

"Foreigner, you sit here, with me," the First Chief invited her.

She saw his face was painted white, and a shiver ran down her spine. She leapt along the branch to his side.

"Good. We are all here. I see all my Chief-brothers, leaders of the tribes of the sacred forests. We have spent a long time resisting the Shamans and the Enforcers of the Gods. The moment has come to take the decisive step."

"My tribe is ready," said a Chief whose face was painted black. "And I know my brothers' tribes too are ready to kill those treacherous Shamans." The Chiefs he now pointed at confirmed his words with much nodding in agreement.

"We too are ready," said a Chief whose face was painted red. Immediately the other Chiefs with red-painted faces brought out their long knives and began to make gestures of cutting somebody's throat.

In a moment all the Chiefs were on a war footing, knives in hands, eyes burning.

"We'll tear the hearts out of those profane invaders who kill our sacred forests!" cried a Chief whose face was painted brown. "Let not a single Shaman be left alive!"

"Let not a single Enforcer be left alive!" said another, his face painted gray. "We'll serve the gods no more! Let's kill all the Shamans and Enforcers and be free!"

All the Chiefs joined in the cry, brandishing their knives with the rage of those who have been enslaved their whole lives, those who have been the helpless witnesses of the destruction of their natural habitat.

The First Chief rose and motioned them to be calm.

“Foreigner, what do you think?”

Albana got to her feet. Her eyes lingered on the Chiefs as they sat down and became calmer.

“I see strong Chiefs. And I like that. I’ve been living among you for quite a while. I’ve come to know the People of the Trees, and they’re a strong, proud people, who want to be free. A people I admire, and I can assure you I’m not soft-hearted, nor do I care for empty praise. If I tell you this, it’s because I feel it.”

The Chiefs nodded, pleased at her words.

“How do we get rid of the Shamans and Enforcers?”

Albana sighed. “Using brute force, attacking them like savages, you won’t succeed.”

The reaction was immediate. The Chiefs all rose in annoyance, amid protests.

“I understand that you want to kill the Shamans, who’ve taken away your authority, who only serve the Proxies. I understand you want to fight the Enforcers, because you’re a brave people. And it does you credit. But if you do it openly, you’ll fail. They’ll kill you.”

The protests grew.

“Think about it for a moment. Why has it taken us so long to get as far as this meeting, to get to this moment when all the Chiefs have joined together at last to rise against the enemy? Well, I’ll tell you why. Because the enemy has had you watched and controlled all this time, and you haven’t found any way of fighting in the shadows. You’re all brave men, fighters, and your first impulse is to go out into the open and fight them. And that hasn’t gone well for you so far, has it? And nor will it go well for you in an uprising.”

The First Chief spoke at this point. “What you say is true. They control our every step, and everything we’ve tried has failed. The Shamans see everything, and they can count on the Enforcers.”

“That’s why I’m saying this to you. Fighting openly isn’t the way to do it. We need to win with cunning. Coolly, and with the spirit of murderers.”

“We’re listening.”

“We’re not going to jump at their throats in broad daylight. That would be suicide. No matter how brave you may be. Tricks, ruses and the night will be our allies. That’s the only way we stand a chance.”

“So what do you propose?”

“We’re going to use the Dark Arts, which happen to be my own specialty.”

“And we’ll win?”

“I’ve trained all my life to win. We’ll win!”

The First Chief got to his feet. “We shall do as the Foreigner says.”

The other Chiefs seemed to meditate for a moment. Then they joined their leader.

“We shall win!” they all cried, knives in the air.

Chapter 10

Adamis stared at the image of Notaplo on the blue water of the pond. It was as if he were really there, with him, reflected on the surface of the quiet waters. But it was not so; he was there alone. Notaplo was very far away, in Alantres, the Eternal City, and he himself was in the underground temple which had been his enforced home since he had been stabbed for helping the Senoca free themselves from the Golden.

The image wavered and appeared to lose strength, as if it were about to disappear.

“Notaplo, are you there?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I am going to adjust the monolith of knowledge in my chamber to try and strengthen the signal.

Adamis felt helpless; there was nothing he could do to improve communication. It was a feeling he had had to accustom himself to during his long period of enforced rest. He leaned the weight of his body on his right foot and a terrible pain ran up to his hip. He bore the pain by clenching his jaw. His body punished him mercilessly the moment he relaxed. The slightest movement, or even the slightest effort, if he did not prepare himself for it beforehand, unleashed an agony.

He took a deep breath, swallowing the pain. He had regained some mobility after a great deal of effort, but the poison had damaged his body. Every day he went through difficult moments, moments when he almost wished the poison had killed him. But then he thought about Kyra, and the dark thought vanished immediately. *I will live for Kyra, fight for her, today, tomorrow, always, no matter how hard the days are, no matter how terrible the punishment.*

“Your Highness?” Notaplo said, and his image on the pond took on greater clarity.

“I am sorry, Notaplo, there is not much I can do on this side to help you. I do not know how to interact with the Power Aruma and her Children of Arutan use. There are no monoliths of knowledge here, I am facing a pond, in an underground chamber, and the walls are lined with vegetation.” He shook his head hard. “It means nothing to me. Everything is very strange in this temple; nothing is as it is in Alantres.”

Notaplo nodded, smiling. “Do not worry, your Highness. Although in appearance it might seem that their Power is very different from ours, it is not really. In fact the Power of the Children of Arutan is more basic, more elemental, and in touch with Nature. That is why they use elements that belong to nature – this pond, for example – as a means of channeling their power.”

“You ought to see this temple. You would love it.”

Notaplo smiled. “I would give everything to be able to study it at leisure…”

“Aruma has spent much of her life here, according to what she has told me, and has carried out what she calls ‘remodeling’. The temple was originally very similar to those at home, but you should see it now. There are ponds in round chambers, immense trees that rise through several levels. Natural daylight comes in, where from or how I do not know; there are rivulets that run between the chambers, waterfalls at different levels, even a huge lake at one of the deepest levels. And not only that, there are all kinds of flora growing in all the chambers of the temple. There are only three chambers that still resemble those of our home. One is my bedchamber, another Aruma’s, and the third serves as an antechamber which can be subdivided into more rooms. But what is really surprising is that nothing of all this is fake or an optical illusion. No, everything is real: rivers, trees, lakes, real flora, natural. Inside an underground temple!”

“Truly fascinating. I would give everything to see it.”

“And I would I give anything to have you here with me, my old friend.”

Notaplo blushed a little and scratched his white beard.

“And fauna? Does Aruma have any animals with her?

“It is strange, but no, she does not. She claims that animals should run free and be happy, not keep a crazy old woman company in her shelter.”

Notaplo laughed.

“Although let me tell you that she is not in the least crazy. She plays that particular role, but she is profoundly intelligent and extremely lucid.”

“And very wise, let us not forget that. She is one of the Ancients, and they lead the Children of Arutan. I understand they are very intelligent Golden, and have great learning.”

“Like you, my old Erudite.”

“Ha… rather more than I, I fear.”

“I doubt that very much. Now tell me, how are you? Is everything well?”

Suddenly an overwhelming sense of worry reached Adamis.

“What is going on, old friend? What are you not telling me?”

Notaplo sighed. “I see I cannot hide my concerns from you, my Prince.”

Adamis waved at the silvery walls of the chamber with its covering of vegetation, then at the pond. “It is this place. It transmits far more than your voice and your image, and I cannot find any explanation of how this is possible.”

Notaplo passed his hand across his bushy eyebrows. “A secret temple of the Children of Arutan… I have lived almost a thousand years and very little surprises me, but this has. Their Power is so rooted in Nature, it is so strong, that it transmits much more than we are able to with our powers based on the five elements.”

“I find it difficult to believe that during all this time we never knew anything about them, that they should have been able to hide themselves so well.”

“When you are pursued, and your pursuers want to put an end to you and all your people, you do the impossible in order to stay hidden. As has been the case here. The Five High Kings would kill them all if they came to know of their existence. They would never allow anybody to oppose the established order they guard so zealously.”

“I do not believe the Children of Arutan pose any real threat to the Houses.”

“Ah, my young Prince, that is where you are wrong. They represent the greatest of threats. Not because of their number, which is small, nor because of their Power, which although great is not comparable to that of the Five High Kings…”

“What then?”

“They represent an idea that goes against the established order, an idea which seeks to overthrow that order. And there is nothing more dangerous in this world than an idea in the hands of brave spirits, since because of an idea the Houses and the Five High Kings were born, and because of an idea they could disappear.”

Adamis gave him a friendly smile. “You are a true philosopher, Notaplo. And I think I understand what you are trying to make me see.”

The old erudite smiled with pleasure. But a moment later his face clouded again.

“That sense of worry is still reaching me, and now I can see it in your face, old friend.”

“I am not good at hiding things. One of those things I do not seem to be able to learn, no matter how long I live.”

“What is the matter? Tell me.”

Notaplo sighed heavily.

“I have a feeling, stronger and closer at hand all the time, that something truly horrible is going to happen.”

“The Houses?”

“Yes.” The old man nodded heavily. “The tension between the five houses is becoming untenable. The High Kings maintain control for the moment, but I do not know how much longer they will be able to avoid confrontation.”

“War? You really think there will be war?”

“I do not know whether things will go as far as that, but I fear there will be bloodshed.”

“Why do you think so? The High Kings have held control for a millennium.”

“The situation … you see, the House of the Fifth Ring, the House of Water, has fallen into disgrace with the loss of their Boundary, that of the Senoca People. Not only have their status and power been tremendously affected, so has something much more down-to-earth: their economy. They no longer have slaves, and without slaves there are no riches, there is no well-being. They have had to ask their allied house for help.”

“My father’s.”

“Exactly.”

“And has he granted it?”

“Yes, the House of Ether has come forward to help.”

Adamis was thoughtful. This news surprised him. Even though they were allied houses, his father weighed up every movement with precision, and this one left him at a disadvantage against the other houses. Even more so taking into account that he was already in a weakened position because of his own son’s betrayal.

“This weakens my father and his house even more.”

“And the rival Houses are taking advantage of it.”

“The House of Fire?”

“Yes, with the support of its ally, the House of Earth. And they are pressing hard; they know they have the advantage. And that worries me profoundly. If the tensions continue – and I believe they will, since there is already a clear advantage they are not going to let slip – they will try to bring the two Houses to their knees. And if they do not yield, all this could end in conflict, even in bloodshed.”

“Or even in a war…” muttered Adamis, pondering the implications. A war would be devastating for his people. He did not wish it, he did not wish to see his family, friends, his own people, suffer the horrors of war. On the other hand, deep within him he knew that a Golden war would give the slaves a chance. Perhaps the chance they needed.

“That is what I am afraid of.”

“And what do you know about the House of Air? They are the ones who hold the key. If they support one side or the other, they will be the ones who set things in motion.”

“Luckily the High King of Air is prudent, and for the moment he is declining to take sides. He has always kept himself in the middle, neutral, and for the moment he is keeping that position.”

“But he might change…”

“Yes, Your Highness, and there is something more. There are rumors that the slaves are rising, and in more than one Boundary. The Houses deny it to save face, but the rumors grow with each passing day.”

“Kyra…”

“And the others.”

“Yes. There are still four Boundaries, four missions. That is how we planned it.”

“If any of them is successful, it will destabilize the situation even further.”

“We need them to be successful, otherwise Men will not survive.”

“True, Your Highness, but depending which Boundary it is and when it happens, it might provoke war between the Houses. That is what worries me.”

“Kyra will succeed, I am sure.”

“Perhaps Ikai will too. We must be optimistic. The truth is that the four of them are very brave.”

Adamis nodded. “More than that, they are heroes.”

“They will accomplish it. I want to believe they will accomplish it.”

“As do I. And when they do, they will create more conflict between the houses, and that will be in our favor. There might be bloodshed, but I do not think it will come to war. The Five High Kings will not allow it. They know perfectly well that it would be going too far. They will stop it, they will stop that madness.”

Notaplo sighed. “It is true that they have done so up till now. The most reasonable thing is to think that they will avoid it. But it seems to me something else is going on, something I know nothing about and which I cannot see, even though my old bones warn me it is about to happen. Something terrible…”

Adamis threw his head back and looked up at the ceiling of the chamber, trying to make sense of the situation. The tension between the Houses was something that benefited the slaves; it was not necessarily a bad thing. But a war between the Golden might be devastating for all, themselves included. In wars the innocent are always the first to suffer. He needed more information.

“We need more information. We need to understand what we are up against. We must find out what it is that you fear.”

“I will try and obtain more information.”

“Do not run too many risks. I need you. I would be lost without you.”

“You flatter me, my Prince.”

“Now I am no longer your prince, and that is the truth, my dear Erudite.”

A feeling of urgency struck Adamis like a blow.

“What is it?”

“They are looking for me. Your father has sent Champion Teslo to find me. I must leave.”

“Go, quickly, and be very careful.”

At the mention of Teslo, Adamis felt a cold pain in his stomach where the Champion had stabbed him. Yet he felt no rancor. He did not hate Teslo. He had carried out his father’s royal order. He had carried out the death sentence which had been decreed. He shivered, and a new wave of pain assailed his back, as though he had been lashed with a whip of fire. He closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and held on. While the pain tormented him the face of his father, the High King, came into his mind. *I do not hate you, father, I understand why you did it. I know it was for the House. But your sentence hurts infinitely more than this torture, and so it will always be, until the day when this poison finally kills me.*

He opened his eyes and watched Notaplo’s image vanishing. The pond became utterly calm, and a sad silence filled the chamber. He turned slowly and headed to the exit. As he thought about everything Notaplo had told him, he began to walk very slowly. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he did not even feel the pain that coursed through his body with every step.

I must go to the Eternal City, The moment has come to face my ghosts and help Men.

Chapter 11

Albana crawled along the bridge of wood and rope with all the stealth she could manage. The moon was full, which did not help; it might even create a problem for the mission. *I'll have to be careful and make use of my skills as a Shadow.* She hid behind one of the village huts, where a family was peacefully asleep, and scanned the huge round platform that opened out before her: like the main square in a traditional village. With the slight difference that this one was built in a giant tree, a hundred and twenty feet up.

She crouched down and watched the guards and the Shaman's hut at the other end. She counted six guards standing in the square, armed with spears and wearing armor. Three others perched on the upper branches above the wooden building, these carrying short bows. *Archers. That's a problem.* In the center of the platform she saw three totem poles representing gigantic birds. The huge yellow beaks and the plumage had been carved in great detail. But this was not what caught her attention; she already knew what they were: Flyers. What made her reach for her daggers were the three dead men tied to the totems. The Shaman had executed them in front of the whole village. He had left them there so that everyone would know what awaited them if they dared to oppose him. *Damn lunatic, sadistic as well as skilled and dangerous.* He had the whole village terrified. The worst thing of all was that those three poor souls had done nothing wrong. The Shaman was simply showing off his power and terrorizing the population.

She swept the area with an expert glance. She was looking for more guards, or any other risk she had not anticipated. But there was nothing else to be seen. To the left of the Shaman's hut, in a building of wood and iron, was the prison where Ilia's father was being held. *I hope he's still alive.* It was more than six months since anybody had seen him. A little beyond was the Proxy's hut, and beside it the barracks where the Guard were asleep.

Time for action! She set off. Using her Power, she disappeared into the shadows which the lush foliage afforded.

Ilia appeared at the entrance to the square. The guards beside the totems tensed as they saw her.

“Who’s there?” said the one in charge, a thin man with an unpleasant face.

At the same time Albana appeared all of a sudden behind the first guard on the branches above.

“You know who I am,” Ilia said.

And as her friend spoke, Albana’s daggers ended the guard’s life.

“You can’t be here at night. It’s forbidden.”

Albana appeared behind the second archer.

“I’m the Chief’s daughter, I want to see my father.”

The guard above them died without making a sound.

“You know that’s not possible. The Shaman forbids it.”

A shadow appeared beside the third guard.

“Today things are going to change. Forever,” Ilia said. There was no shadow of doubt in her voice.

“You’re crazy.”

The third archer died with a muffled sigh.

“No, today we rise up.”

“Who, you? What are you going to do?”

“No, not me, the people.”

At a sign from Ilia, her brother Pilap and Lial appeared beside her. They were armed with knives and short axes. At once the six guards formed in front of them.

“Withdraw and you won’t die,” the guard said threateningly. “I’ll let you leave because you’re the Chief’s family. But take one more step and we’ll kill you.”

Ilia, Pilap and Lial stepped forward defiantly.

“You’ve asked for it. Archers, kill them!”

But the arrows that should have finished them off never came. The guards looked up towards the archers on the upper branches. They found only silence and foliage.

“Archers!” the guard called, his voice a mixture of anger and surprise.

“They won’t answer,” Ilia said.

“What have you done?”

“What we should have done long ago.”

“You’ve gone mad!” He turned to the other guards. “Kill her!”

Ilia raised her arm. At her signal a hundred men and women appeared behind her, armed with knives, axes and short bows. The green faces showed the determination of an enslaved people whose freedom will not be denied to them any longer.

“Emergency!” cried the guard and withdrew behind the totems. “Emergency!” he yelled at the top of his voice.

Armed guards began to emerge from the barracks and assemble in formation beside their comrades in the square. The Shaman and his personal guard came out in haste. A moment later the Proxy came out with his retinue. The Shaman wore his feathered robe, and when he saw what was happening he donned the mask with the huge beak and made his way through to the front of the guard.

“Ilia!” he cried with a voice filled with hatred and loathing.

“Shaman,” she replied icily.

“Have you gone mad? How dare you defy me? How dare you defy the Golden Gods?”

“Your time has come, Shaman. This is where your reign of terror and death ends.”

“If you dare oppose me, you’ll be opposing the Gods. You’ll die. You’ll all die.”

“No. The spirits of the forest say it’s time for us to rise up for our freedom. Their message is clear, I hear it in the wind, the leaves whisper it, the brooks babble of it. We all hear it. Today we rise up. Today we fight for freedom.”

He pointed to the three men tied to the totems. “If you try anything, you’ll end up like those three.”

“It’s because of them that we’re here. So that it never happens again.”

The Shaman reached for the huge Flyer claw he wore at his neck like a trophy and showed it to the rebels.

“I am the law in this forest, I lead this village. Go back to your homes and sleep, and I’ll forget this insult. If not, then I’ll cut your throats one by one, with my own hands, all of you. I swear it by the Gods!”

Ilia looked back at her people. Not one of them flinched, the eyes of those men and women were burning. They demanded the end of terror, they wanted freedom.

“The people are with me. Your days of giving orders are over,”

“Let me remind you that I have your father and your uncle captive. One more step and I shall order their hearts to be torn out.”

Pilap and Lial tensed.

“Don’t move...” Ilia said. Then she stared defiantly at the Shaman. “And I have the Foreigner.”

“Who?” he said blankly.

“The one who comes from another world, one like this, where the men and women have already risen up against the Gods and gained their freedom. The one who walks with shadows. The one who kills with the same ease as death herself. The one who cannot be seen. The one who has lived among the Gods and come back to tell the tale. The one who has Power, like the Gods.”

“Nonsense! That person doesn’t exist! You won’t scare me! They’re no more than lies and stories for children. Don’t think I don’t know that you’ve been spreading those rumors among the people. Lies! They’re all lies! Don’t believe her! You’ll die for those lies!”

“It’s all true. And they believe me.”

“Proxy, take your retinue and bring me her father and uncle. I myself will cut their throats before everyone.”

The Proxy gave a nod and went to the prison, followed by his most trusted men.

“Now you’re going to learn a very valuable lesson!” the Shaman added.

Ilia gave him a crooked smile. “We’ll see.”

The Proxy and his men went into the prison. There was a moment of silence. Everyone turned expectantly towards the building, but in the darkness it was impossible to see anything inside. They heard muffled cries and several dull blows. And then silence fell once again.

“What’s going on?” the Shaman said furiously. “Go and see!”

Several guards went into the prison. They came out looking frightened.

“The Proxy … is dead … they’re all dead … and the prisoners … have escaped,” stammered one of the guards.

“What? That’s impossible!”

Ilia smiled. “The rumors seem more likely now, don’t they?”

“I’ll put you all to the knife!”

“No. Today you die, and the rebellion begins.”

The Shaman turned to give his men the order to attack. From a liana, without a sound, a figure descended, almost invisible to the human eye until it was two hand-spans above the Shaman’s head.

“Kill them all!” he ordered.

A hand seized the necklace with the Flyer’s claw and lifted him two feet off the floor. He looked up in bafflement, kicking the air. A dagger took off his mask with a single slash. His face and neck were exposed to sight.

“I want you to see me. I am the lie you refused to hear about.”

The Shaman stared at Albana, his eyes wide with fear.

“The Foreigner!”

Albana smiled from ear to ear. “That’s what they know me as here. And this is where your luck runs out.” With a lightning stroke she cut his throat. The Shaman died with disbelief in his eyes.

Ilia turned to her people.

“The Shaman is dead! Take the rest prisoner!”

And the whole village fell on the guard.

At that same moment, in all the main villages of the six Counties of the Boundary of the People of the Trees, simultaneously and with the full moon as witness, the people rose against the Shamans, using subterfuge and night as their allies. With the arrival of dawn, Shamans and Proxies would cease to exist and the people would have taken the decisive step towards freedom.

Two weeks later, at dawn, Albana gazed down at the capital of the Boundary from high up in one of the gigantic trees. A deep sadness came over her. The city had been built by clearing an enormous circular area in the heart of the forest. The swine had felled and stripped thousands of trees and acres upon acres of forest. In their place they had built a city of stone and wood, protected by a ring-shaped wall eighty feet high. Columns of black smoke rose to the sky. *Smithies and saw mills. The bloody swine.* And what was even worse: the existence of six other cities like this one, the capitals of the six counties. *Luckily they're not as big, so there's not quite so much damage to the forests.*

She climbed to a higher branch to get a better view. From her new position she could see the vast monolith of the Gods and the Regent's Palace. She shook her head. *Time to pay a visit to the Regent and the Enforcers. An unexpected visit, bloody and uncomfortable.* She smiled, and her eyes gleamed. She put her hand to her chest, where the disc of the Shadows hung. Her eyes lingered on it. She had less and less Power left. She only used it when her own Power failed, or when she needed to use a skill she had not yet mastered and which the disc helped her with. She practiced and experimented every day with her own Power. She practiced to improve the skills she had already developed using her own Hybrid Power, and experimented so as to develop new ones. This was what she liked most. Trying things out and discovering new skills she could develop through her Power. It took a great deal of trial and error, and once she had accomplished something she still had to practice so that it would turn into a skill she could call on instantaneously. It was hard and frustrating, but it filled her with joy when she discovered new possibilities. So she practiced and experimented tirelessly.

It'll be best if I ration it. Once it was exhausted the disc would be useless and she would have to throw it away. *I'll have to use my own Power. That'll be interesting to see. But without risk there's no gain. I have to trust my own capabilities and leave the disc for when I really need it.*

She sighed. She needed to go on developing her skills using her own Power alone with no help from the disc, something she was forced to do

more and more. The advantage of using the disc in those skills she had already acquired was that they were easier to control. And more powerful. Besides, she hated the feeling of utter exhaustion which was the result of using all the Power stored within her. She hated being left helpless when her source of Power ran out. *And oh, doesn't the damn thing run out quickly. Too quickly.* After that she simply collapsed on to the ground, unable to move. A few moments later sleep took her away. The Power which was consumed exhausted the body completely, after which it needed to sleep in order to recover not only the Power used but the energy to allow her to function. *I'll have to be very careful not to consume all my power.*

"What do you think?" Ilia asked her. The girl was coming towards her, walking along the huge branch with absolute ease. Pilap and Lial were behind her.

"It's not going to be easy."

"It doesn't matter, we'll fight," Pilap said. There was determination in his eyes.

"We're ready to take it," said Lial, her eyes burning.

Ilia smiled at her brother and her cousin. "Let Albana speak."

"The circular area that leads to the city is a problem. I calculate there are about eight hundred paces from the edge of the forest to the wall. We can't attack from the trees, and they'll see us coming the moment we set foot on the ground. I don't like it."

"They're making it bigger," Ilia said. "Every day the circle's bigger. A few months ago it was only five hundred paces across. They're killing our forests, Mother Nature weeps disconsolately, the spirits tell us so. We must stop this sacrilege."

"All that comes to an end today," said Albana.

Ilia smiled, but there was concern on her face. "We trust you, Foreigner."

"How are your father and his brother?"

Ilia sighed deeply. "Weak, very weak, but alive. We can never thank you enough for what you've done for us, for my family." She spread her arms wide, including Pilap and Lial in the gesture.

"It's nothing. I'm glad we found them still alive."

"Only just," Pilap put in.

“We’ll never forget,” Lial said gratefully, and hugged her.

Albana had not expected the gesture, very rare among those rough, savage people. Surprised and moved, she turned to Ilia.

“Is everything ready?”

“The Chiefs await your orders.”

“Pass on the word: they have to take the six county capitals.”

“Are you sure?” Ilia asked doubtfully.

Albana nodded several times, with her eyes closed. “Absolutely sure.”

“Let’s divide our forces…”

“It’s a risk I believe we have to take. They’re not expecting an attack, least of all a coordinated, simultaneous one against all the cities. And we’ve already eliminated the Shamans and Proxies of the villages.”

“Yes, all the people are with us. Women, men, elders and children are behind us.”

Albana smiled. “That’s what I was hoping for. But the children and elders mustn’t fight today. Let it be known.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Go,” said Albana.

Ilia saluted and left.

“You two, pass the order on to our people: we’ll attack when the sun is at its highest.”

Pilap and Lial nodded and left at once.

Albana stared at the city a moment longer. *I hope I’m not wrong, for the sake of these brave savages. Don’t let me be wrong,* she said to herself, gazing up at the sun.

With the sun at its highest there came a deafening cry from all along the edge of the forest. Thousands of green-skinned savages poured out from among the trees and ran across the open space to the city wall, as if desperate to reach an immense treasure. The alarm rang out in the city, and the guard took up their positions on the walls. The rebels in their thousands

flooded in from all directions, as if the forest surrounding the fateful cleared circle were sending its children to put an end to the aggressors. They ran in their loincloths, armed with short bows, light hatchets and long knives, without armor of any kind. Yelling at the top of their voices, they crossed the area of open land.

At that same moment, in all six county capitals, the scene was being repeated. The alarm rang, and was drowned by the deafening cries of the rebels in all six capitals. The Guard could not believe what they were seeing. The People of the Trees had risen in arms and were attacking the cities. Thousands of arrows flew from the battlements and the first rebels fell dead. Blood was spilled, and now nothing could stop the conflict until its resolution, one way or the other. Under a storm of arrows and death, the rebels reached the high wall. But unlike in other Boundaries, the walls posed no difficulty for the People of the Trees. With the aid of lianas they began to climb the wall at tremendous speed and with amazing ease.

Tens of thousands of rebels attacked the capital from all directions, as one. The Guard was overwhelmed by the savage thrust of the rebels, who fought like true green demons. They climbed the wall to hurl themselves headlong at the soldiers, felling as many as they could. Once on the ground they struck savagely with knife and axe in a bloodthirsty frenzy. They fought with such rage and fury, striking at everything they came across, that they even caused losses among their own people. Thus fought the People of the Trees, with fury and savagery, and nothing would stop them, and for a good part of the battle it seemed nothing would.

The Guard defended the battlements as best they could, but the rebels overwhelmed them. It was then, with the battle all but won, that everything changed. Suddenly horns rang out, and that fateful sound was followed by a horrible sight: the Enforcers, in formations of three, began to take their positions along the wall. The parapet was now filled with rebels, who held back when they saw the Executors in their silver and blood-red armor, bearing their spears of death. But the rebels were brave and determined, and they hurled themselves against the Enforcers with the same fury they had shown the Guard. They would not cower, no matter how massive and lethal the Executors might be.

The fighting turned frantic. The rebels climbed the wall to attack the Executors. The result, though, was very different to what had happened

with the Guard. The Executors sent the rebels tumbling down the wall with brutal blows from their powerful limbs. The rebels, vastly inferior in size and skill with weapons, were no rival for those monsters of death. With brute force and lethal skill with their spears, the Enforcers cleared the parapets in order to regain control of the wall. The battle began to tilt in their favor.

The rebels did not cease their attack, despite the level of casualties they were suffering. They hurled themselves three at a time against the Executors so as to bring them down, then finish them off once they were on the ground. The fury and savage blows of the rebels were beginning to cause damage among the Enforcers, although the cost in lives was phenomenal. For every Executor they managed to kill, they lost twenty men. The Executors speared them or threw them off both sides of the wall like ragdolls, to hit the ground below. Doubt was beginning to make itself felt in their minds. They were losing the battle, and there seemed to be no way to turn things around.

In one last desperate attempt to take the walls, the rebels attacked as one with all their remaining strength. The battlements filled with savage shouting, desperate fighting and death. The rebels were fighting with all their spirit. The Executors repelled them with brutal efficiency. Ilia was fighting alongside her brother Pilap and Lial, trying to open up a gap among the Executors with a hundred or so braves.

“Keep going! Don’t give in!”

The braves with her brought down a couple of Executors and killed them on the parapet.

“That’s the way! Onward!” Ilia cried.

Pilap and Lial lunged at the legs of an Executor as he fought three of their companions. The Executor’s spear ended the lives of two of them, but Pilap and Lial managed to bring him down.

“Now kill him!” Pilap cried.

Lial held on to the spear arm of the Executor with all her might, while three rebels stabbed him until he was dead.

They managed to move a few feet forward on the parapet, but met with another group of Executors. Ilia climbed on to the battlements and surveyed the fighting. All along the wall’s circumference the rebels were fighting the

Enforcers, and to her chagrin, they were losing. Now the difference was clear. On the opposite side, Ilia glimpsed Albana. She was fighting at the head of a group of rebels, and they had made their way into the center of the city.

Ilia pointed her out to her brother and Lial.

“She did it!” Pilap said excitedly. “She got into the city despite the Executors.”

“Just like she said she would,” Lial pointed out, with a smile on her blood-smeared face.

Ilia looked around her. “That’s one piece of good news, but it’s the only one. The Enforcers are decimating us.”

“What are we going to do, sister?” Pilap asked uneasily.

“I don’t know, Pilap, we’re losing the battle. Perhaps I should call the retreat.”

“Let’s go on fighting,” said Lial, raising her blood-smeared knife.

“If we keep fighting we’ll all die,” Ilia said. She realized that her men were watching her, looking unsure.

Pilap stared fixedly into his sister’s eyes, “Better to die fighting than go on living as slaves.”

“Albana’s still fighting down there,” Lial pointed out.

Ilia heaved a deep sigh. Then she smiled at them.

“We’ll fight to the end!” she said, and gave the order to her people. “To the end!”

“To the end!” the rebels cried back, and plunged into the attack.

Thanks to the momentum of their brave hearts they managed to make the Enforcers retreat. But it was like wounding a wild animal. The Enforcers counterattacked with all the weight of their superiority, and the rebels began to fall in great numbers. In the midst of the chaotic combat Lial was hit on the head with brutal force, and before Pilap could catch her she fell from the top of the wall into the inner courtyard. She died when she hit the pavement.

“Lial! Nooooo!” Pilap cried in despair.

Behind him an Executor raised his spear to run him through.

Filled with abysmal horror, Ilia did her best to warn him.

“Pilap! Behind you!”

But her cry was lost among the thousands of others that rose to the sky in the din of the battle.

The spear came down to kill him. Pilap turned. Ilia knew it was too late. And suddenly two claws buried themselves in the Executor’s shoulders and bore him away bodily. Eyes wide, Ilia watched as her Flyer, Happy Flyer, whisked the Executor up into the air and then dropped him so that he crashed on to the ground.

“What…?” stammered Pilap, not understanding what had happened.

There came a shrill croak. A moment later others followed, south and north of the wall.

Pilap pointed up at the sky “Look there, sister!” he cried.

A hundred or so of the majestic Flyers were coming down from the heavens to fall by surprise on the Enforcers and help the rebels.

“I… I can’t believe it,” Ilia said. He watched the giant birds fighting the Enforcers. They grabbed them in their huge claws and flew off with them to the clouds, then dropped them or else dashed them hard against the walls. Those Executors who managed to wriggle in their grasp or wound them were torn to pieces in mid-flight by their enormous beaks.

“You have to believe it, now we have a chance!”

“Now I understand why Albana ordered the attack on the county capitals. It was for this. To free the Flyers and send them to our aid.”

“A great trick!”

“And tricks and ruses are what she said we’d need to win.”

Happy Flyer fell on the group of Executors in front of Ilia and Pilap, as a giant eagle might fall on a handful of lizards, and swept them away.

Ilia saw their opportunity. “Re-group! We need to seize our chance!”

The fighting turned into madness. The rebels pushed on while the Flyers came down from the heavens with an eerie croaking. Ilia signaled to her Flyer, who came down to the wall to pick her up. She climbed onto the bird and stroked her neck.

“Thank you, my love.”

The giant bird nodded several times in acknowledgement.

Pilap seized a bow and quiver and climbed up behind his sister. They took off, and Ilia was now able to take in the chaotic battle in all its splendor of blood and death. Pilap shot arrow after arrow at the Enforcers, while Ilia did her best to locate Albana. She guided the bird toward the center of the city. Suddenly a blue-white flash appeared before them, like lightning, and a discharge hit one of the Flyers. Wounded, the bird lost its sense of direction and crashed against the wall.

“What was that?” Pilap asked.

Ilia guided her Flyer to the spot, and they saw it.

“It’s an Eye-of-the-Gods, and he’s using a disc of the Gods!”

Another flash hit a second Flyer, followed by another discharge which hit a third bird.

“They’re killing them!” Pilap cried. He shot an arrow that hit the Eye in the chest before he could use his disc against them. Ilia made Happy Flyer swerve abruptly, and another flash brushed her right wing. The Flyer, frightened, swerved so abruptly that she almost lost her two riders.

Pilap gestured at another giant bird, which had been hit in mid-flight and was falling to the ground fast. “We have to help them!”

“But how?” Ilia said despairingly. If the birds died, they would all die with them. Their fate was irrevocably linked to that of the majestic birds.

All of a sudden she heard a tremendous blast which nearly deafened her. A huge shadow passed in front of them. She was completely at a loss. They were in mid-air, above the city. What could possibly have generated a shadow as high up as that? Before her mind could unravel the mystery, she saw it. Before her eyes: the great monolith of the Gods was falling in all its glory, to shatter into fragments on the floor of the city.

“That was Albana!” Pilap cried.

Ilia guided Happy Flyer to the center of the square, and there indeed was Albana beside the base of the ruined monolith. Very close to her were a dozen Enforcers who must be pursuing her.

“Albana, be careful!” Pilap cried.

But Albana did not seem to fear the Executors. She hailed the siblings with a smile, completely ignoring the Enforcers.

“Tell her to take cover!” Pilap insisted. “They’re Executors!”

Albana made untroubled gestures for them to come down.

“How? What?”

Ilia brought the Flyer down beside Albana.

“Don’t worry,” she said, looking at the Executors as she spoke. “They’re harmless now.”

“I’ve no idea how you’ve done it, but there’s no way to say thank you in the whole wide world,” Ilia said, as she hugged her with all her strength.

Albana gave them a smile of pure satisfaction. “Didn’t I tell you, with a bit of trickery and Dark Arts there’d be a chance for us?”

Pilap waved a hand toward the Executors, who were wandering aimlessly a few steps away. “Why don’t they attack?”

“Without the monolith they lose their minds. I don’t know why, but that’s what happens.” She pointed up at the battlements, where the same image was repeated before the astonished eyes of the rebels. “Hence my little mission of stealth and shove.” She smiled roguishly.

“We’ve … we’ve won…” Pilap still could not believe it.

Ilia was looking around in disbelief. “So we’re free?”

Albana nodded with a broad smile.

“How will we ever be able to pay you back, Albana?”

The brunette looked up at the sky, where the Flyers were gliding. She said with a sigh: “One day, not very far off, I’ll ask for your help.”

“And you’ll have it,” Ilia assured her.

“It’ll be to face the Gods themselves: all Men, together.”

The two siblings exchanged glances and nodded.

“The People of the Trees will come to your call.”

Albana gathered them both into an embrace.

“My mission here is finished.”

“You’re leaving?”

She nodded. “It’s time to leave. My friends need me.”

“Good luck,” Ilia said.

“Can I go with you?” Pilap asked.

Albana shook her head. “It’s too dangerous. Help your sister.”
He nodded. “All right.”
“Farwell, my friends.”
“Farewell, Foreigner, May the spirit of the forest protect you.”

Chapter 12

When Adamís entered the central chamber of the temple under the lake he found Aruma sitting on one of the massive roots of the giant oak that grew inside the underground temple. With her back against the thick trunk she was combing her long white hair with a golden comb, her gaze distant, humming a sweet melody. At that moment, to his eyes, the Wise Old Woman seemed some mythical creature out of a legend. She was singing to the great tree which inexplicably rose amid the underground chambers like some imperishable guardian of that strange realm, swaying to its queen and lady, who was dedicating a loving lullaby to it. Surrounding them, and spreading out across ground, walls and ceiling, grew lush vegetation like that of some forest with magical qualities. It smelt of forest, of damp earth, of eucalyptus, all of which left Adamis entranced.

Concealing the pain he felt when he walked, and trying to move as firmly as he could without giving way to the punishment, he crossed the chamber and greeted his hostess.

Aruma came back from her thoughts, and her eyes lingered on him for a moment. Then she put her comb away in one of the pockets of her brownish-green robe and smiled at him.

“How do you feel today, young Prince of Ether?” she asked. She half-closed her eyes, as though trying to deduce it for herself.

“Rather better than yesterday and rather worse than tomorrow,” Adamis replied with an ironic smile.

Amused by his answer, she bowed her head. “I see we’re in a good mood today.”

“As good as can be expected of anybody condemned to death with a shriveled body which tortures him endlessly.”

“That’s a very good answer. It seems that little by little my excellent sense of humor is rubbing off on you.”

He smiled and raised his arms. “Let us hope so, or else I shall lose my mind too,”

Both of them laughed like good friends. For Adamis’s spirit laughter was a comforting balm, the only thing he had at hand to alleviate his suffering. He sat down beside Aruma, careful not to make any sudden movement. He gazed into her eyes, searching for the best way to tell her the decision he had reached.

“Has the time come?” she asked him all of a sudden.

He threw his head back in surprise. “How do you know? Can you read thoughts?”

“This crazy old woman can read you like an open book.”

“Are my thoughts that transparent? My intentions that obvious?”

She smiled sympathetically. “As far as the rest of the world is concerned, no. You can rest assured of that. But here in my house” – she spread her arms wide – “in the shadow of my child” – she gently stroked the bark of the great tree – “you have no secrets from me.”

“It may be that we spend too much time together.”

“That too, if you find it easier to accept that way.”

“I do. I do not understand your Power, and your mystical relationship with Nature and her children.”

“Ah! But we are all children of Mother Nature, and we owe ourselves to her. My Power is not so different from yours.”

“I would say it is.”

“It is simply more in harmony with Nature. There is a direct link between my power and the natural world around us. A symbiosis. That’s why I can perceive feelings, emotions, that you, my dear child, cannot.”

“I would like to…”

“For that you would have to spend a long time studying with me. It isn’t an easy task. I don’t think it’s the right moment. Am I mistaken?”

“No, you are not mistaken. But perhaps someday.”

“You will find me here if things don’t change too much. Although I have the feeling that is what they are going to do.”

“You have the feeling, or the information?”

Aruma burst out laughing. “I see you know me well.”

Adamis put his hand to his chin. “The Children of Arutan listen in the shadows, they know what is going on in Alantres, in the Eternal City, what is coming, and as one of their leaders you will have been told.”

She patted him affectionately. “A good piece of deduction,”

“The time has come for me to go back to Alantres and help Men.”

“Hmmm… that’s a decision I was expecting. But do you really believe, young prince, that you’re in a fit state to undertake a mission of that kind?”

Adamis stretched his neck and tried to appear as whole as possible.

“I am indeed. I have been recovering for a long time and I think I am ready. I owe it to you, to your care, your patience. I shall never be able to repay all that you have done for me. I owe you my life and my present health.”

Aruma waved her arms, making light of this. “Nonsense!”

“I owe you everything, and you know it. Let me at least thank you for it.”

“I’m an old Healer, nothing more than that. I’ve been learning for over a thousand years from Mother Nature and using my power together with the knowledge I’ve acquired. I’ve studied Nature, poisons and toxins, the blood, the Power of the Golden itself, and that is why I’ve managed to gain some more time for you. But I’m only a Healer, and my powers and knowledge have limits. I cannot save you from the death that flows through your body and one day will kill you, I can only delay it. And the price to be paid is a high one: the body pays it and the mind suffers it.”

“I will bear with it. Thank you for giving me this time stolen from death.”

Aruma smiled, but a moment later her face clouded over.

“I must confess that this old witch hasn’t done it out of the goodness of her heart.”

“I had guessed as much,” Adamis replied even-temperedly.

“I asked Ikai to bring you here for a reason, a very important one. And for that same reason I saved your life, and for the same reason I’ve helped you recover some semblance of your past health and strength, as far as I could.”

“What is that reason? You have never told me.”

“There are things better explained when the time is right.”

“Is that time now?”

“No. The moment has not yet come. But this I will say: one of these days, not too far in the future, I shall need you to return the favor, and I trust you to honor your word.”

“What will you ask of me?”

“Something that you’ll find very hard to do. As hard as anything can be.”

“And if I cannot do what you ask?”

“Will you deny me anything after what I’ve done for you?” she said. There was a touch of annoyance in her voice.

Adamis sighed. He knew he could not refuse her anything. But what if she asked him something that went against his honor? Something so horrible that his conscience would not let him do it? Unfortunately he had the feeling that it would be something just like that.

“I shall refuse you nothing, unless it goes against my honor.”

Aruma stared at him so hard, and her face took on such a stern look, that he knew that was precisely what she would ask, and also that she would not take no for an answer.

“You know I’m not one to forgive, nor do I have pity on those who betray me or deceive me. Nature is wise, but she’s also merciless. I follow her principles and her teachings.”

Adamis weighed up the situation. He could refuse, but then Aruma would turn her back on him. In addition he needed her help to reach Alantres. He was trapped. He had no option but to accept.

“Very well. When the time comes I shall do whatever you ask me to.”

Aruma’s face softened. Looking at the great tree as if it were a witness to the moment, she said:

“The deal is closed.”

“Will you help me, then?”

She stood up, and her white hair cascaded down to the ground.

“Let’s see whether you’ve regained all your power.”

“Is it necessary?”

“Yes,” she said in a voice that left no room for refusal. “You won’t survive unless your Power at least, if not your body, is completely restored. We must find out.”

Adamis sighed. For the three years and more he had been there, every change of season, Aruma had made him pass the same test. A test to measure his Power, to see how much of it he had been able to regain. A test to see whether it was recovering from the effects of the toxin that was coursing through his body. And every season he failed the test. Again and again, without exception. He had never let it dampen his spirits, he knew that the battle to regain the full use of his body was lost, he would never go back to being what he had once been, but his Power at least he could regenerate and win back, and it was that thought, that certainty, which drove him to keep trying. However difficult it might be, however hard he might find it. Often he wondered whether she might have imposed the test on him solely to motivate him. Seeing the triumphant smile on her face at that moment he was more than sure that it was so. But he had never given up, and after each failure – and there had been many of them – he had gone on working with greater driving force and determination.

“Or is it just that the fine high-born Prince doesn’t wish to fail once again and make a fool of himself?” She gave a mocking giggle. “I told you, nobody will give you anything for nothing here. Here you must earn everything through effort and suffering. That’s Mother Nature’s law. That’s how you learn to value what you have in your life. Here, in my realm, Princes are mere Golden with neither privileges nor silver spoons. I warned you that very first day: the days when everything was done for you, when every wish you had was granted simply because you had been born in a Powerful House, are over. Here there are no slaves or servants who will give you everything. Here your wishes aren’t granted to you because of who you are. Nature is queen here, and she teaches us that without struggle, there’s no life.”

“I ceased to be a vain Prince a long time ago. Now I am only Adamis, a cripple. But that will not prevent me from helping my own people.”

Aruma giggled. “Very well said. Then, my dear cripple, let’s see whether you can pass this test.”

Adamis did not allow himself to be manipulated by Aruma's words. He knew she said them to unsettle him and make him fail, but this time it would be different, this time he was intent on passing the test. He would manage to stop her. Today he would manage it.

Aruma went to stand in the center of the chamber. She summoned her Power and rose, hovering in midair. She glanced at him and bowed lightly, then spread her arms wide and began to spin. She laughed, and her laugh was both defiant and mocking. Her strange behavior at certain moments, as if she had lost her mind, puzzled him. But this time he did not let himself be taken in by her role as a crazy old witch. *It is a performance, it is not real. She is a Wise woman, an ancient leader of the Children of Arutan. Do not allow yourself to be fooled by her. Focus.*

While she spun round and laughed, Aruma's face shone with joy. She seemed to be enjoying herself as much as a little girl playing in the middle of the forest. Adamis concentrated on capturing her aura, something truly difficult, because she managed to hide it so well that during those first few years he had failed the test every time. But now his Power was greater, far greater, and calling upon it, he tried to find her.

Aruma became aware of this and stopped laughing. Now it was she who was concentrating and using her Power to hide her aura from him. He was using his own Power based on Ether to try to capture the wise woman's spirit. She, on the other hand, was using the Power of Nature to hide her essence, blending it with that of the great tree and the vegetation in the chamber. The battle of wills between the two began to grow more determined. Adamis used more and more of his Power, and at last succeeded in making out a trace of Aruma's aura. At once she countered by using her own and making it disappear again.

Adamis did not let himself give way to frustration. He was very aware that it would be extremely difficult; he had to defeat his hostess at her own game, in her own realm. But something began to be clear to him: his Power seemed to be completely restored. He could see it within himself. What had previously been a putrid, almost empty well, was now a deep lake filled with energy. And it was brim-full. The joy which came over him was so great that he smiled.

"Having fun, young princeling?" she said in an attempt to distract him.

But he did not flinch. At last, after all that time of pain, he had managed to regain his Power, and nothing would spoil that victory which had been achieved through effort and determination. *Now I have to defeat her, or else I will not be able to help Kyra, and she needs me.* He concentrated with his whole being and made use of his Power. And this time he saw her aura with total clarity. *There it is, it is mine.* He focused on it and was about to block it. *I have you!* But at that moment his leg was seized by cramp and the intense pain made him lose his concentration, and with it the aura.

“The body betrays us?” Aruma said, seeing him writhing in agony.

With a grimace Adamis straightened, bit his lip and bore the pain. He said nothing. He did not take the bait. He let the pain pass and tried again, with even more determination. And this time he succeeded. Aruma noticed and tried to give him the slip by blending into the vegetation like a chameleon. But Adamis was now pure focus. A terrible stab in his stomach was tormenting him, but he did not lose his concentration. He blocked the aura and prepared himself.

Aruma realized that he had her now. She used her Power to speed up her spinning. He used his own and began to slow down the movement. Two beings of extraordinary power struggled like titans, one rotating, the other trying to stop the rotation. Adamis threw all his power, his body and his soul into the effort. A spasm of pain consumed him, but he was not prepared to give in now that he was so close to winning. Two opposing forces of enormous strength fought until one of them was exhausted and forced to concede defeat.

At last the rotation stopped. Aruma remained suspended in midair, her face contorted with effort, and finally came down gently. A moment later Adamis collapsed on the floor, writhing in pain.

“You did it, Lord of Ether.”

Adamis could not speak, the pain was too intense.

“You’ve managed to defeat me. You’ve passed the test. Something truly remarkable. I didn’t think you’d be ready. There’s a lot of pride and determination in you, more than I thought. I’m deeply glad that you proved me wrong.”

“Will… you… help me…?” he stammered.

“Of course. A deal is a deal. I may be a crazy old woman, but my word is sacred.”

She came over to him and placed her hands on his stomach and back, then concentrated and used her healing Power. A feeling of wellbeing enveloped him; he felt as though a restorative breeze was caressing his face, and a scent of eucalyptus reached his lungs. The pain gradually began to recede.

“How… do you… do that?”

“Mother Nature teaches us to look after the body, to ease pain.”

“Will you… teach me… someday?”

Aruma laughed affectionately. “It’s taken me half a lifetime to learn. I don’t think you’d want to stay with this crazy old woman for as long as that.”

Adamis stood up, very slowly, careful not to drain his strength.

“It is always an honor and a pleasure to be in your company.”

“So I see.” She laughed again. “Maybe someday. Now you have a great deal to do.”

Adamis nodded. “I must go back to the Eternal City.”

“You do know that the moment you set foot in Alantres you’ll be captured, don’t you? And this time nothing will save you. The High Kings will cut off your head.”

“I know…”

“What have you come up with? I know you have a plan. You might be a princeling, but you have a good head.” She winked.

“I have a way of avoiding discovery. I have been practicing a lot.”

“Show me.”

Adamis closed his eyes, spread his arms wide and summoned his Power. Out of his chest came a white mist which enveloped him completely. For a long moment nothing happened. Then his body flashed several times, with a crystalline light, and after a moment, before Aruma’s keen eyes, the Prince of Ether began to fade little by little until he had become one with the mist. A moment later the mist vanished and Aruma’s eyes were unable to see him. But he had not gone anywhere; he was still there, motionless.

“The Power of Ether is significant,” she said. “You’ve turned yourself into Ether itself, into spirit. Truly extraordinary. I don’t think there’s any of our own people who’d be capable of anything like that.”

“My father can,” Adamis said. “He taught me.”

“I hear you, but I can’t see you. Not even with my power am I able to see you.”

“That is because mine counteracts yours.”

“But there’s something I must tell you. Although I can’t see you, my young friend, I can feel your presence.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“It might be only me, or those who are akin to Mother Nature, like me.”

“I do not think so. If someone uses their power to detect my presence, my own power, they will find me. I will have to take the risk.” He came out of his Ether state and became visible again, gradually taking on essence, turning solid before her.

“Hmm. Perhaps we might reduce that risk.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The chameleon.”

Adamis stared at her, at a loss.

“I’ll help you hide your essence, as the chameleon does, by blending in with its surroundings.”

“Will you be able to?”

“Yes and no. As with the chameleon, its camouflage fools most but not all the predators. You won’t be able to deceive everyone. Those with much Power or great perception will find you out. But you’ll be able to deceive the least adept. Or at least so I hope.” She smiled.

“Thank you, with all my heart,” he replied, and bowed his head low in respect.

“Let me work on it. Come back in three days and I’ll have things ready. Go and rest. You’ll need it.”

Three days of rest later, Adamis came to see Aruma. He found her in a strange garden full of exotic flowers and trees he had never seen before. The Ancient was in the habit of talking to her plants as though they were her pets and understood her. By now nothing about her surprised him. The garden was in a separate chamber which was normally closed, one of the few which were.

He waved to her from the entrance, and she smiled at him. She was sitting on a wooden stool in a sort of workshop, at a large table laid with bowls and glassware. Behind this was a huge shelf full of glass and ceramic containers of various shapes and sizes. On one side was a hearth with a low fire on which several pots were boiling. The smoke they gave out and went up the chimney was a disagreeable green.

“Come in, Prince of Ether,” she said. She was doing something to a bowl in which some viscous substance was being prepared.

“I do not mean to disturb you…”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smile. “I’m working out one of my “experimental substances”

Very slowly, Adamis went over to the work-table and sat down.

“Don’t get too close to the hearth−those fumes are toxic. I wouldn’t want you to have an accident.”

“Um… certainly. May I ask what it is?”

Aruma nodded. “It’s a preparation based on various very special, hard-to-find plants and resins that I myself cultivate in my gardens. I like to experiment with the fruits of our Mother Nature, to see what new uses can be worked out by combining those fruits.”

“Is it a medicine?”

The Old Golden shook her head, and a malicious smile touched her lips.

“The contents of this garden aren’t used for healing, but rather for the opposite.

“To injure?”

“Give me a moment, and I’ll show you.” Aruma finished creating the substance and poured it carefully into the pot on the fire. She stirred it for some time, then took it from the fire and poured it into a ceramic bowl. She

went to the shelf and poured some gray substance from a jar on to the mixture. They waited for it to solidify.

“That’s it.” She said. “Let’s try it,” She took a small knife from the table. With a wooden spatula she smeared the substance on the blade of the knife. Adamis watched completely absorbed. “Ready to see what it does?”

He was eaten up with curiosity. “Yes.”

“Raise two protective spheres. One against physical attacks, the other against attacks of Power.”

He obeyed, using his Power to surround himself with two protective spheres. Aruma took hold of the knife and brought the point close to these barriers.

“The Golden believe in their ignorance that they’re more powerful than Mother Nature, that their Power is superior to that of our wise Mother. But they’re wrong, the arrogant egomaniacs.”

She pushed the knife, and the blade pierced both protective spheres as though they were butter.

“Incredible!” said Adamis. “Nothing should be able to cut through those!”

“And yet, it does. Now tell me, which is wiser and more powerful, the Golden, or Mother Nature?”

Adamis nodded. He understood what Aruma was trying to show him.

“Nature.”

“Never forget that, Prince of Ether.”

“I never will, I can assure you.”

The wise woman gave him a satisfied smile.

After what he had seen, he was full of curiosity. “And what is in the other pot on the fire?”

“Aha! Devoured by curiosity eh?”

“Well, yes… a little.”

“This preparation is something I haven’t yet managed to master. Mother Nature provides us with the raw materials and the knowledge, but the experimental process is a long and arduous one. I’ve spent years working on this potion, and someday I’ll succeed.”

“What is it?”

“A toxin: the most powerful one I’ve ever developed.”

He frowned in distaste. “You are working on a poison? Why?”

Aruma smiled maliciously and stood up. She went across to some flowers very like orchids, but with black instead of white petals.

“Poisons in nature have two basic functions: they’re used to serve predatory ends, as in the case of spiders, snakes, jellyfish and others. Or they’re used in defense, as in the case of bees, frogs, caterpillars, plants, fungi…. I’ve spent my entire life studying them. My objective is to find a poison which carries out both functions simultaneously on application and which only affects the Golden, not all the other creatures on the face of the earth. I still haven’t succeeded, but each day I come closer. When I do manage it, I’ll be able to show the Five High Kings that their Power is as nothing against that of Mother Nature, that the path they’re following is wrong, because we are not more powerful that our Creative Mother.”

“I see…”

“But don’t let my philosophical ramblings cast a shadow on your day.”

“Listening to you always brings me wisdom. I am delighted to do so.”

She smiled sweetly, and put her arms around him. “I have a few presents for you.”

“Really?” he said in surprise.

The wise woman searched beside the shelf, took an object and showed it to him. He was unable to see it clearly, but it seemed to be transparent.

“What is it?”

“A ring, a very special one. I’ve named it *Chameleon Ring*”

“I can hardly make it out.”

“That’s the idea. I’ve put a spell on it with my Power. I know it’s something the Golden don’t do anymore, they prefer their discs of Power, but we follow the ancient traditions, when Power was transferred into objects and was shaped for a particular function. The ring makes the essence of the person wearing it blend into his surroundings and thus become very hard to detect. Put it on.”

He put the ring on his index finger. Aruma concentrated, trying to pick up the prince’s essence.

“Nothing. I can’t pick up a thing. It works,” she said, and smiled broadly.

When Adamis looked at his finger, the ring was now invisible. And yet it was there, as though it were part of his finger.

“You can’t use it all the time. The Power in it has unwanted effects.”

“Such as what?”

“Harmful ones. It could go as far as producing nausea, distortion of reality hallucinations… so use it only in moments of crisis, when there’s no other alternative….”

“And I have one final present before you leave.”

“More?”

“You’ll need this. It’s for when things turn ugly. Always carry it with you, at your waist, but don’t unsheathe it until you truly need it.”

She handed him a short sword in its sheath. Its handle was brown and green, and the crosstree seemed to be wooden.

“A wooden sword?”

“Yes, but not just any old sword. I’ve put a spell on it, and there are several of my preparations on the blade. It will save your life.”

“What does it do?”

Aruma giggled. “Better that you discover that by yourself. But not here. When the day comes when your life’s in real danger. Yours, or that of someone you love.”

“Very well. I shall honor your wish. How am I going to repay you for all that you have done for me?”

Aruma’s face was suddenly serious. “Remember your promise.”

“I will remember and honor it. You have my word on that.”

“Even though you may not know it, our paths run in parallel. You’re young and inexperienced and don’t see what’s really going on and what’s at stake. But one day you’ll understand. You’ll see there’s much more at stake than you ever thought possible.

“And now, get ready to leave. I’ll warn my people. They’ll help you get into the city.”

“Thank you.”

“And for Mother Nature’s sake, don’t get killed, or else all will be lost.”

“I shall try not to.”

“Don’t try. Do it.”

Adamis took his leave of Aruma with a warm and heartfelt hug, turned and left the hall. As he was going out, he had the feeling he was going straight into the jaws of death. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

“I will not let you catch up with me,” he told death, defiantly. But moving on at a cripple’s pace, bent and dragging a battered body, he did not give the impression that he would be able to escape from anybody or anything, least of all death.

Chapter 13

A week after having left the domains of the People of the Highlands behind, Ikai was making his way through the dense forest at the first light of dawn, following Maruk's trail. Something bright which seemed out of place in that natural environment caught his attention. *There it is. The Barrier of the Gods*. He went up to it slowly until he was able to see it clearly, then stopped in front of it. *Here begins the Boundary of the House of Fire. Asu's Boundary.*

He raised his left arm with the hated Ring. When he brought it closer to the barrier, his arm started to shake. Adamis had made the whole group an offer to take them off, but if he did so there was no guarantee that someone might not die in the process of crossing the barriers. So they had agreed not to take the risk. He put the hand with the Ring across the barrier, and a golden flash made him narrow his eyes. The shaking turned to spasms as he was crossing the barrier to enter the domain of the Gods of Fire. *We'll win*, he said to himself, and lost consciousness.

He came to as evening was falling. His body hurt as though he had been beaten by a group of Tormentors. He stretched his muscles and adjusted the satchel of food, then his bow and quiver. Lastly he checked his sword and long knife. Everything was in order, and he could keep on his way. He ventured into the forest very warily. Evening was beginning to fall, and he was haunted by an ominous foreboding, one he could not shake off. He was a rational person, someone who analyzed things, and the feeling troubled him. But of course he was in the Boundary of the House of Fire, and that changed everything. Maruk had decided to deal with that particular Boundary for this very reason. Ikai could not blame him. He felt he would have done the same in his place. After all, it had been Oskas who had killed Liriana, and Oskas was a henchman of Asu's. *Maybe we shouldn't have let him come. But he was determined, he wouldn't have accepted a refusal.*

He shook himself and shut his eyes tight. Now he felt even worse. Remembering Oskas upset his stomach. Try as he might, he could not accept that this evil monster was really his own father. Or rather, that he had once been his own father. If he really was Siul, they must have done something unthinkable to make him end up as Asu's loyal spy and assassin. Something so horrible that it had broken his body and mind. *In the end there was nothing left of my dear father. I didn't recognize him. He was beyond any possible salvation.* Deep down, Ikai was glad Oskas had died. If a speck of Siul had been alive inside that creature, he would have begged to be killed. He took a deep breath and exhaled hard. *I must concentrate on finding Maruk.*

Before he went on, he wanted to make sure he had not lost his friend's trail. He had been following it ever since he had crossed the Boundary. He took out a small leather pouch and poured its contents on to the palm of his left hand. There were four locks of hair, tied with colored ribbons. *Four companions, four locks of hair.* Red ribbon for Kyra, blue for Ikai, black for Albana and green for Maruk. Each one of them carried an identical set of locks so as to find each other if the need arose. For Maruk the need had arisen, and Ikai would find him.

He put Albana's lock to his nostrils and breathed deeply, trying to grasp her scent, but all he could find was her memory. He sighed. *Soon, very soon.* He put the lock with the others inside the pouch, all except Maruk's, which he kept in his left hand. He took out Adamis's disc with his right hand and held it in his open palm, closed his eyes and concentrated on feeling the essence of that lock of hair, Maruk's essence, just as Adamis had trained them to do before they left. They had practiced a lot, as it was difficult to manage. For the best part of the morning he tried, without any result. He began to feel discouraged, then remembered that none of them had ever made it in less than a morning and half an afternoon of trying.

Finally, with the sun at its highest, the disc gave a golden flash and he was able to see Maruk's silhouette in his mind, blurred to begin with, then clearer after a moment. Now the second part: to grasp his aura. It took him another long while, but in the end he succeeded in picking it up. He held on to it. His friend's silhouette vanished and he was left with the image of his aura.

He used the disc's Power to scan the forest before him, searching for the trail of his friend's aura. At first he could not find it, but he did not lose heart and kept trying. He knew it had to be somewhere in that area; it was just a matter of finding it. He moved through the forest with his eyes closed, sweeping the area with his mind. Trees and other obstacles appeared as dark shapes in his mind, which he dodged as he went. The vegetation was a diffuse white. He kept moving, scanning the distance, careful not to trip or to bump into anything. It was like sleep-walking, except that he was wide awake even though his eyes remained closed. The Power of the disc was his sight. After a while he began to have doubts about whether he was in the right place; he ought to have found a trace by now.

He gazed up at the sky through the heavy branches of the trees, and a sharp pain in his mind, brought on by the brightness, told him it was not a good idea. As he lowered his head he glimpsed a distant light, like a silver reflection. Intrigued, he went in that direction. He was forced to walk so slowly that he began to get impatient, but if he opened his eyes he would lose the possibility of tracking and have to start again. He reached the place where he had seen the brightness and bent down. In front of him, on the soil, was a footprint. Above it there levitated a silver bubble. He stared at it and felt no doubt: it was Maruk, he had passed through there. He raised his closed eyes and twenty paces further on he saw another bubble. A little ahead was yet another. There was no doubt that it was Maruk's trail. *I found it! At last!*

The trail led him to a village just outside the forest. He opened his eyes, put away the lock of Maruk's hair and Adamis's disc and studied the village from the edge of the forest. The houses were rather better than those of the Senoca, better built, more advanced. They were painted red and yellow. It was quite a big village, well-built and well-kept. He could not see anybody in the square or near the houses. Maybe they were working in the fields. The wind shook the leaves of the trees above his head, and that was when he realized; there was no sound coming from the village. No chatting, no laughter, no arguing, not even a dog barking. There was nobody there. Nothing.

He got to his feet, crossed the dirt road in front of the forest and went into the village. It was empty of any life. A shiver ran down his spine. He went over to one of the houses, whose door was open. He went in carefully,

and what he saw disturbed him even more. It was deserted, and everything was in perfect order: the kitchen tidied, the wooden and steel utensils hanging on the wall, the clothes folded in the chest, the beds made, the rooms clean. No sign of violence. No sign that people had left in a hurry in the face of some imminent danger. No sign of anything. It was as if everyone had evaporated. He ran two fingers through the layer of dust that covered the table by the entrance. This house had been empty for a long time.

He went out into the square and searched a couple more houses for clues. But he found nothing. They were all in the same state. *How weird! What could have happened here?*

“Hello!” he cried, in the hope that someone would show themselves.

The only answer was the sighing of the wind.

“Is there anyone here?” he shouted again at the top of his voice.

No reply.

It was a ghost town. He could not guess the reason, but it was unlikely to be a good one. Discouraged and puzzled, he decided to go on until he found another village which could give him answers about what was going on here. He walked for three days until he saw another village. He scouted it and found the same situation: another ghost town. He was getting more and more uncomfortable, but he kept going. Two days later he saw another village. Immediately he went into the forest which lined the path and went on walking. He did not want any surprises.

He went close to the village, hidden in the bush, fearing to find a new ghost town. But this time he heard voices, human voices. Happiness made him smile. There were people, and they were alive. He sighed when he saw them and relaxed. He took a good look at the villagers: they had white skin, dark brown hair, and dark brown eyes; they were really not that different from the people of the Highlands. He was not surprised by the fact, as this boundary was quite near the Highlands. He had not needed to use one of the underground Portals Adamis had marked on his maps to get there. He had come on foot in a little over two weeks, heading south-west. If the two Boundaries were so close, it was logical to think that the people living in them would be similar in features, not too different in race. As for culture… that he would have to find out.

Lying on the ground, watching the activities of the village, there was something that did not quite fit in that place. Next to a farm two old men seemed to be negotiating over a rickety cow one of them apparently wished to sell to the other. Opposite, two women were plowing a field. They were of a certain age, and he felt pity for them, They must need to work right up to their final days. *Produce or die. In this Border and in all the others. The accursed law of the Gods.* In the small central square, around a single fountain, a group of children were running around as they played, yelling non-stop. They were still too young to wear a ring. *Enjoy whatever you can. Childhood is fleeting*, he thought bitterly.

And at that moment he realized what it was that did not seem to fit. *There are no young people!* He scanned village and surroundings again, looking for anyone young, and could find none. *How odd!* He was puzzled. This was not normal at all. Even when there were massive Summonses, for the mines or the fields, they did not take all the useful population of a village. There were always young people left behind so that the community could survive, so that they would go on producing. This made no sense. His sense of something ominous intensified.

Nor did he find any trace of either Guards or Enforcers. The best thing to do would be to look into this. It was a small village, not much more than a hamlet, so there ought not to be any enemies. Slowly, letting himself be seen, he came out into the open, walking with his arms out at his sides and his hands empty of any weapon, so that they would know he had no ill intentions. He had left behind his sword and satchel, hidden beside a tree, but in case things turned ugly he had his knife ready at his waistband, behind. When he was very near the square he slowed down even further.

Suddenly one of the children saw him, stood still, put his hands to his forehead and screamed. Straight away the other children did the same. Ikai made soothing gestures to them, but the children ran away until they had disappeared on the far side of the village.

From the door of one of the red adobe houses in the square an old woman was watching him. She was dressed in dark yellow, with a black ribbon around her wrinkled forehead. Her eyes were large and pale. He recognized fear in them.

He kept his hands up and showed her his palms. “I won’t hurt you,” he said.

The old woman gazed at him in silence. A gray braid hung over her right shoulder.

He went up to her very slowly. “My name is Ikai. Don’t be afraid.”

The woman raised her hand.

He stopped. “I’m just looking for information. Honestly. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The old woman said something in a language he did not understand. Slowly, so as not to scare her, he gently tapped the communication bracelet on his right wrist.

“Can you repeat what you just said? I couldn’t understand you.”

“Go away.”

The bracelet was working, and he could understand her now. “Why are you rejecting me?”

“You’re not from these lands.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve come from a long way away … What’s going on here?”

“Go back the way you came.”

“I found deserted villages. What’s happened?”

She shrugged and lowered her gray eyes.

“Have they made the people disappear?”

The old woman put her finger to her lips.

“I understand. You’re afraid of talking.”

She nodded. “We all are.”

“Can’t you tell me anything?”

She shook her head.

“Maybe I could help you somehow.”

“You’re young and strong, but you’ll die if you try to help us.”

“Where are the young ones, the men and women? Working?”

The old woman shook her head. Her wrinkled face showed deep sorrow.

“Aren’t they working for the Gods?”

“No.”

“This Boundary is still under the power of the Gods, isn’t it?”

She nodded very slowly.

“So where are they?”

The woman pointed toward the east.

“In another village?

She shrugged and lowered her gaze again. “They took them away.”

“They took them away to work? A Summons?”

“No.”

Ikai did not understand the answer, what it meant. A very unpleasant feeling came over him.

“Are they… are they alive?”

The old woman sighed deeply and shrugged again. But the gesture was so sorrowful that he felt it meant *no*.

Seeing he was not getting anywhere, he made a desperate attempt to get some information. “I’m looking for a friend, perhaps you’ve seen him. He came here some time ago, the same way I came here today.” He indicated the forest behind him.

She nodded.

“Maruk. His name is Maruk.”

“Yes.”

“You know him, is he all right?”

She shrugged again with the same melancholy gesture.

“Where is he?”

She pointed east again. “With the others.”

“Can’t you tell me anything else?”

“Go.”

“But…”

“Now. Go. Or this’ll become a ghost village like the others, and it’ll be your fault.”

Before the harshness of her words, he hesitated. He wanted to beg her to give him more information, but she had disappeared inside her dwelling, closing the door behind her. He tried to find someone else who might be

able to shed some light on the situation, but all the doors were shut to him. However much he tried, nobody would speak to him. They were deeply afraid. Not wanting to force matters, he decided to continue east. He would find answers somewhere else. He said goodbye and went on along the path. As he was leaving he had the feeling that many eyes were on his back.

He walked on for many days, following the path. The landscape was beautiful, which he was thankful for. Walking alone through the world was a feeling he could not entirely get used to. A friendly landscape comforted his spirit. He was surrounded by wide green fields and forests of beech and ash. The land was mainly flat, with barely a hill in the distance. The breeze was gentle and warm, and although the sun shone high above, it did not burn the skin. The climate seemed to be a good one in that Boundary. It rained enough, because there was verdure and yet not too much of it, and the temperature was very mild. It was a beautiful place to live. There was only one problem: he did not meet anyone. He had already passed another deserted village, and the old woman's strange words echoed in his head. He had no clue as to what was going on there, but it was nothing good. He had to find out and he had to find Maruk.

What's happening here? And the uneasy foreboding settled on him again like a heavy tombstone.

Chapter 14

The portal flashed twice and became activated. At the third flash a bent figure appeared in the middle of the silver platform. Immediately the Eye-of-the-God in charge of the portal turned toward the new arrival and challenged him.

“Who goes there?” he shrieked. There was surprise in his voice. Three Custodians on duty by the portal turned, spears and shields at the ready.

The figure straightened slowly, but its face was not visible under the hood that covered its head. The Enforcer stared at it, trying to puzzle out who it might be, but the stranger was wrapped in a brown cloak which hid his body.

The Eye checked in the silver logbook he carried. “There’s no transport designated for this hour,” he said,

The figure said nothing. It looked around, as if trying to identify this place.

The Eye closed the logbook. “This is very irregular. I haven’t been informed. I need to communicate with my Lord and ask whether this transport has been authorized.” At once the three Custodians pointed their spears at the new arrival.

Is the good Lord Urdin still in charge of the Portals of the Fifth Ring? the stranger said in a mental message. At the same time, with a casual wave of his hand he let the Enforcer see that his skin was golden, the golden hue of the Gods themselves.

The Eye-of-the-God was utterly baffled. Realizing that this was a Golden, the Enforcer bent in submission. The Custodians stood to attention.

“Lord Urdin has been replaced by Lord Ura. It is to him, my Lord, that I must report…”

And so you should. I wish you to take my greetings to my good friend.

The Eye, still with his head down and without daring to look at him, sought to excuse himself.

“Forgive me, my Lord, nobody informed me…”

Naturally. This visit was not planned.

The Enforcer opened his silver book. “Who should I announce to my Lord? It’s a little late for a visit…”

The figure gazed up at the starry sky.

True. It is rather late for a formal visit. Yet this is not one of those.

“I don’t understand, my Lord. Doubtless you belong to the House…”

Oh, I forgot to mention it, I am not of the House of Water.

The Enforcer began to straighten up slowly. The Custodians were suddenly on the alert.

“You are not from the House of Water? Which House do you belong to, my Lord?”

Hmm, interesting question. I had not thought about it. I no longer belong to any House.

“But… my Lord… that’s impossible.”

For a being like you it is, since for you it is inconceivable that a Golden should not belong to any of the Five Houses. But let me assure you that it is so.

The Enforcer did not know how to react. He was in the presence of a Golden, one of his masters, but one not of his own House, and from what he had said, one who did not belong to any House. There was no room for this in his logic.

Confused?

“My Lord… who are you? Who should I announce?”

I am sorry, but you must not announce anybody, since I cannot reveal to you who I am.

The Enforcer closed his book and stared at the stranger, at a loss. After a moment his priorities seemed to come back to him.

“If you’re not of the House, you can’t be here without an express invitation at this hour of the evening.”

The stranger nodded.

“I must ask you to identify yourself to my Lord, Lord Ura.”

Unfortunately for you, and for these three Custodians who are already looking at me suspiciously, I cannot do so.

There was a moment of silence. The Enforcer turned to the Custodians.

“Arrest him,” he ordered.

The three huge warriors took a step toward the portal. At the same time the stranger’s body shone, and three translucent spirits issued from his chest. The spirits, their faces twisted with horror, fell on the Custodians. They entered their bodies, and before they could take a second step they fell to the floor without a sound and died, their souls devoured by the three terrible spirits.

The Enforcer stepped back.

“That kind of Power is that of the House of Ether,” he said, his shrieking voice trembling.

I see they are making you with greater intelligence all the time.

“Please, my Lord, don’t kill me.”

Curious, I thought your function was to serve us. You should be happy to die for a Golden. If I were to tell you to, you should gladly take your own life,.

The Enforcer searched among his logic for what to do next. On the one hand what the stranger said was true, but on the other hand he had no wish to die.

“You are from a rival House, I can’t follow that order.”

Well parried. I am indeed of a rival House, and therefore you do not belong to me and I cannot order you to take your own life.

The Enforcer nodded.

Unfortunately, although I appreciate your intelligence, I cannot let my arrival be known. And I know you will hasten to inform your master, as the pip of Power embedded in your brain instructs you. That is why I am deeply sorry, but I cannot let you leave.

The Enforcer turned to run. The stranger snapped his fingers. Before he could take a single step, a transparent mist enveloped the Enforcer. A moment later he fell to the floor, dead.

My name is Adamis, the stranger said. *I am truly sorry, but I cannot let my presence here be known.* He walked slowly forward between the corpses.

With the stars shining above, glancing furtively around in case any more Custodians on duty should appear, he came to a square with a fountain in the center in the shape of a ship sailing the seas. A figure was waiting there in the shadows, hiding its presence behind a tree. Adamis stopped. He tried to straighten himself up; he must pretend to be a powerful Golden, a Lord. But a sudden intense pain in his stomach made him bend double. He endured the suffering and stood tall, like a noble of that ring. He stared at the figure hiding in the shadows. It did not move, it simply watched him.

There was an impasse. He was not sure whether to move on or not. He used his Power to perceive the essence of the figure and make sure he was not heading into an ambush. Water, he sensed the element of water, which did not surprise him as he was in the fifth ring. *Whoever it is has a great deal of Power.* He needed to be ready, as it represented a threat. But then he perceived something else: it was as if there were traces of the other elements mixed in with the element of water, as if they were blended together. *Hmmm, this is unusual. The Power develops with an affinity to a single element, but I have come across this phenomenon before…*And then he knew who was waiting for him.

He went up to the figure.

“Welcome, Prince of Ether,” the message came to his mind: a young, feminine voice which he recognized.

“I am no longer a noble from a powerful House, now I am a nowhere man, stateless. Let us forget formalities and speak like commoners.”

“As you wish,” she said with a small gesture of acknowledgment.

“Besides, you and I already know each other, Ariadne, Healer of the Caste of Commoners.”

“I see the memory of our meeting beneath the Eastern Temple the day before your exile remains intact.”

“There are things one never forgets. But just in case, I brought you this.” He showed her the pearl she had given him at that meeting.

She smiled as she recognized it. “My pearl.”

“Although I did not need it, I recognized you from your essence. I remember it well.”

“Keep the pearl, you might need it.”

Adamis nodded and put it away. “I see you no longer wear the tree-mask of the Children of Arutan. You are a woman of remarkable beauty.”

Ariadne blushed. “Wearing it when I walk around the Fifth Ring attracts too much attention.”

“Particularly if you are pursued.”

She was suddenly concerned for her leader. “How fares my revered lady? Is she in good health?”

“Aruma is well. Very well, I would say. Do not worry. I have a message to you from her.”

From the northern side of the park there appeared six Custodians doing their rounds. They were heading towards the square.

“It will have to wait. We must move,” Ariadne said urgently.

“Once they reach the Portal they will raise the alarm,” Adamis said, glancing in its direction.

“Then let us hurry. This way.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Do not worry, I know this ring intimately. I have lived here all my life. We will be safe.”

Adamis gave a slight smile of acceptance and nodded.

The two Golden set off. Adamis was trying to keep up with the pace Ariadne set, but he found it impossible. His battered body would not let him go so fast. The young woman slowed down when she realized the Prince’s predicament.

“Stand straight,” she whispered to him. “The taller you stand, the less attention we will attract from the Custodians.”

He nodded and tried to stand tall and straight. Holding the position was torture for him, but he was determined to endure it. Ariadne led him through parks and streets which were practically deserted, always keeping in the shadows, avoiding the better-lit parts, where there would be patrols. Just as she had said, the young woman knew the place perfectly well. They

arrived at an area of waterways and saw two figures waiting for them beside a boat tied to a small, swaying wooden pier.

Adamis hesitated when he saw that these were massively-built slaves.

“They are trustworthy,” Ariadne assured him.

They climbed into the boat and headed south, threading the labyrinth of channels of that section of the Fifth Ring. In this ring, the kingdom of the House of Water, where there should be cobbled streets and avenues there were canals and rivers instead. The two slaves guided the boat skillfully, seeming to know every nook and cranny of that extraordinary world of canals and lakes within the ring.

Adamis half-closed his eyes and tried to see as far as his sight could reach by the lights that lit up the ring. He had always been impressed by what made up the kingdom of the House of Water. Buildings in soft blue floated amid artificial lakes. Palaces and squares were ornamented by waterfalls at different levels which seemed to come down from the sky itself. Exuberant fountains and high geysers decorated magnificent palaces whose walls appeared to be of pure water. He knew these were the residences of the noble families, and that the further away from them they went the safer they would be. But he could not but wonder at the insane design of that beautiful world where rock was water, and wherever you turned your eyes, you found yourself surrounded by it.

The small boat sailed the silent night. Nobody spoke, and after a while, in the soft light of the lamps which lit their journey, he began to feel as though he was on some funerary vessel, as if they were heading for a burial at sea. He shivered, but shook it off. *You already knew that coming back home involved great risk. There is no way back now.*

Ariadne pointed ahead. “There is our destination.”

Adamis half-closed his eyes and managed to make out a building which was set apart amid the network of canals and small lakes. Seeing it, the emotion he had been feeling became even stronger. The building was spherical, completely covered in gold. The double, concave doors which gave access to the interior were lit by two enormous braziers. He recognized it at once: it was a temple.

“A Temple of the Golden Dogma?” he asked Ariadne. There was deep concern in his voice.

“I know it must seem strange to you, but it is the safest place.”

“There will be priests of the dogma. They are your sworn enemies.”

Ariadne smiled and bowed her head.

“What better place to hide than in your enemy’s own house?

Adamis stared at her uneasily. The risk was enormous. The temples were under the control of the priests, for whom the Golden Dogma was everything, and they reported to the leading house. It was madness.

“Why not hide in some simple house? Among the third caste, the Commons?”

She shook her head. “Because that is exactly where they are looking for us.”

“But there,” he said, indicating the place of prayer and shaking his head, “it is too risky.”

“The best-kept secrets are those which are open to view.”

“Now you speak like Aruma….”

She smiled. “I will take that as a compliment.”

The boat reached the temple landing, and the two slaves secured it without a word. Ariadne leapt down and gestured to Adamis to hurry. The Prince did all he could to go faster, holding back the pain his body was punishing him with. Ariadne reached the doors of the temple and gently pushed them open. He was not surprised: the temples were never closed, since the priests’ duty was to look after the wellbeing of all the Golden, day and night, for all eternity, until the day they reached immortality. After a *creak*, a threatening twilight welcomed them.

“Come,” she said, and went in.

He glanced back over his shoulder and saw the two slaves continuing on their way down the canal. A moment later they disappeared into the shadows of the night, as silently as they had appeared. He faced the open door and went in. Everything was in darkness. A sepulchral silence filled the hall. There was no trace of Ariadne. He decided to use his Power to find her. He let a thread of his essence run through the spherical room in search of the Healer. He swept it from floor to ceiling, but there was nobody there. This unsettled him.

He saw a door in the opposite wall, across the hall. He was about to start towards it when suddenly a trapdoor opened in the floor. He stopped in his tracks.

“It is me,” Ariadne’s voice said. “All is clear. You can come down.”

Adamis snorted in relief. For a moment he had thought something must have gone wrong. Several stone steps took him down to the cellar of the building. The trapdoor closed after him, and he went into a cold, damp chamber lit by a pair of oil lamps. At the far end a hearth and two wooden chairs could be made out.

“It is not much…” Ariadne said apologetically.

Adamis was looking around the room. “It is more than enough,” he said with a warm smile. Very slowly, he sat down on one of the wooden chairs beside the hearth, concealing the suffering that simple act caused him. Seeing the pain reflected in the Prince’s face, Ariadne took a step forward to help him, but he refused her help with a wave of his hand.

“Do you need anything?”

“My body would appreciate a blanket. The dampness in this ring penetrates one’s very soul.”

“Of course, right away,” she said, and disappeared into the next room. She soon came back carrying two old woolen blankets. “Here you are, they will warm you up, I often use them myself.”

“Thank you, Ariadne.”

“We are in the fifth ring,” the Healer said, “in the kingdom of water, so the damp here is constant. But one ends up getting used to it.”

“Over the years… I do not think we have enough time for that.”

She nodded.

“Thank you,” he said, wrapping the blankets around him and sitting down again.

“Better?”

“Somewhat better, yes, thank you,” He felt the warmth penetrating his body, although he could not shake off the cold embrace of the damp, which heightened the suffering his body was inflicting on him.

Ariadne noticed his pain.

“If you would let me examine you…”

“There is nothing you can do. Aruma has tried everything. My body is corrupted and the poison is now a part of my blood, I shall not live long, and the time I have stolen I must pay for in suffering.”

“Even so… allow me, please.”

Adamis sighed. Then he relented with a nod.

Ariadne used her Power. A beam of brownish-green light issued from the Healer’s chest and ran through the Prince’s body, from head to foot. She examined him carefully, not missing a single detail. After a long analysis, she stopped. She looked into his eyes, and in her own he recognized a look of sadness and frustration.

“I am sorry…”

“Do not trouble yourself. I know my fate and I accept it.”

“What has happened to you is not fair…the torture you have to bear with every movement, every day. You are a Golden Prince, in your veins runs the blood of one of the oldest and most powerful families. It is very hard to see you like this.”

“Very few things are fair in this life. I do not regret what I did and I will pay the price. This added time Aruma has gained for me with her wisdom and power I will use for good. I am no longer a Prince, I am just another golden who, like you, is searching for the best for our people.”

“And in your case… for Men.”

He nodded. “Indeed, and for the race of Men.”

“And if you had to choose?” she asked suddenly.

“Between Men and Golden?”

“Yes.”

Adamis considered the question. It was a complicated one. The implications went deep.

He said at last: “Let us hope I do not have to make that decision.”

Ariadne nodded heavily, and he noticed that his answer worried her.

“I cannot heal you, but there is something simple I can do to make you feel better.”

She turned to the hearth. “This will be good for both of us,” she said, and began to get a fire ready to give them warmth. The flames did not take long to catch hold, and Adamis welcomed the comforting feeling of warmth. For a moment the pain vanished and he was able to relax. He inhaled and exhaled deeply, enjoying the pleasant sensation.

Suddenly there came a metallic click, and he knew it was the trapdoor they had come in by. Ariadne turned toward the stairs. A figure appeared, coming down. He wore a purple robe with a blue sash. *A Priest of the fifth ring*! Adamis stood up and prepared to attack.

Ariadne raised her hand. “Do not hurt him!” she said.

The Priest stopped at the foot of the stairs and did not come into the chamber.

“He is a friend,” Ariadne explained.

Adamis hesitated. He studied the man of the dogma as he activated his own Power, ready to deal with the intruder. He was more or less his own age, with a sharp face and aquiline nose. His skin was pale golden. The face was dry, yet the eyes, emerald-green, shone with a sweet glow, that of kindness.

“He is with us,” Ariadne assured him.

Adamis indicated the priest’s chest. “He is a priest, he is with the Golden Dogma, with the Five High Kings.”

The man of faith spread his arms wide.

“I pose no threat,” he said in a voice which was soft yet firm. “Ariadne has asked me to give you shelter in my humble home.” He indicated the chamber.

“And you always agree to help me,” she said, and went to hug him. Their embrace was almost fraternal.

Adamis looked hard at them. “Who is this?” he asked Ariadne.

“This is Sormacus, a great friend of mine, and of the cause.”

“Is he one of the Children of Arutan?”

“Not only that, but he is the Key.”

Adamis showed his incomprehension by a gesture.

“You will understand in due course,” she said. “But let me assure you that he is the key to our race’s new future.”

Sormacus took a step toward Adamis and looked closely at him.

“It is an honor to meet the exiled Prince of Ether.”

The two men’s eyes met as they studied one another.

“It is a pleasure, Sormacus,” Adamis said.

Ariadne came to stand between the two of them and turned a determined gaze on them.

“The time has come for the Children of Arutan to act,” she said. “The time has come to change the history of the Golden.”

Chapter 15

Kyra jumped down from her horse, patted it and left it to graze by the water. She took Adamis's disc out and gazed at it, entranced. The golden pip inside the crystalline object always captivated her. In it a tiny particle of Adamis's Power was stored, a fraction of him. She longed for him so much it surprised her. *I hope you're well, my golden-skinned, golden-hearted Prince.* Luckily her nature did not allow her to stop to sigh. She had a mission on hand, and it was time to act.

She looked carefully at the pond. There was nothing special about it: a pond of green-blue water, quite large and round. No stream flowed into it, as far as she could see. She shrugged, closed her eyes and connected with the power of the disc. *Show me the way.* The disc rose above her hand, remained suspended in the air a hand-span high, then began to shine with an intense golden light. She opened her eyes and stared fixedly at it. The disc gave out a silver beam in the direction of the center of the pond. After a moment it vanished.

"What the heck! What do you mean? You want me to dive in there?"

It made no sense. She concentrated again and commanded the disc: *Show me Adamis's map.*

There was a flash, and a translucent map appeared over the disc. She could see herself represented on the map by a blue bubble. In front of her was a perfect image of the pond, with a black bubble in the middle of the water. *How weird, it shows the center of the pond too. Could it be broken?* She commanded the disc to move its focus further away, as if an eagle were soaring into the sky. The map spread out and the image moved away. Now she could see far more widely, but the two dots, the blue and the black, remained unchanged.

"I'll look for another temple…" she muttered. But the disc did not react to her voice.

She sighed when she realized this. *Move your focus further away, I'm looking for another temple,* she said in her mind, and this time she was obeyed. The map expanded, while the two dots shrank until they disappeared into the distance. Suddenly there came a black flash on the map. *Close in on that.* The disc obeyed and showed the new black dot. *Hm… that's a long way away. It would take me ages to get there on horseback.* She snorted. She had no choice but to run the risk. She would have to go to the center of the pond, no matter how little she might like the idea.

She put the disc away and went back to her piebald horse.

She stroked its muzzle. "Time to say goodbye, my friend." The good steed nickered. "I can't take you where I'm going." She picked up the bag of food and slung it on her back, then slapped the horse's rump to start it on its way.

"Run free, my friend," she said. She went slowly back to the pond and sighed. "Time for a little practice," she said as she gazed up at the sun. It was her way of speaking to Adamis, even though he could not hear her. "And yes, I practice every day, as you begged me to do. And without any help from the disc, just using my own Power."

During the long time she had spent looking after Adamis, he in his turn had given her an immense gift. One that she would never have imagined possible: he had helped her accept who she was. It was something she had flatly refused to do; in fact she had resisted with all her being. She could not accept that she was the daughter of that monster Oskas, there was no way she could. Nor could she accept that she was a Hybrid with Power, an aberration like her father. But Adamis had helped her to accept herself: with love, without forcing her, firm in the face of her protests, tantrums and even insults. In the end he had succeeded. Now she knew who she was and accepted it. And what was even more important, she knew she need not be like her father.

She sighed. *I'll never be able to thank you enough.* Now she was at peace with herself, accepted herself. She was a Hybrid with Power, and she was proud of what that meant: she had her own Power, one which her body generated and could use. She did not need Adamis's disc, and that gave her enormous satisfaction. She had not yet learnt how to use it other than at the

most basic level. She could not do anything on a grand scale, like those things Adamis and the Gods were capable of, but little by little, day by day, she was learning a bit more and improving a little. *One day I'll be able to do amazing things. You'll see.*

She closed her eyes and focused. She needed to achieve complete calm, to put out the fire which always burnt inside her and prevented her from using the Power. She remembered she had been practicing every day for a long time, so as to turn it into an almost reflex act. She had still not attained that skill, but one day she would, because even though she was a hybrid she would become as powerful as a God. *One day a Golden will kneel before me, and I will have defeated him with his own weapons, at his own game.*

She focused on herself, searching for her own aura, her own spirit. She had to find it to be able to use it. Gradually she began to make out a silhouette, faint… an outline in white light… very small and far away… She brought it closer, pushing as if it were an object she wanted to attract. At last, after a long moment, a white flash ran through her body. She had done it. *I have my aura. I have myself.* Focused on her aura, now she had to find her power and use it. This was the most difficult part: truly difficult, and something she could still not fully master.

She focused on her inner self, within her chest, and tried to visualize her Power. She had had to learn that part by herself by trial and error, as it was different for Golden and Hybrids. For the Gods, Adamis had explained to her, using their Power was practically immediate, like having a thought and then acting upon it. They simply called on it and it happened at once. The greater the power, the faster it could be called and commanded. The most powerful Gods, those belonging to the Five Royal Houses, were so supremely fast with their Power that they could destroy an enemy before he could use his own to defend himself. Kyra could not even imagine it, because it was such a nightmare to activate her own. It seemed that it was not so easy for a hybrid to reach his or her own Power. The Power was a part of oneself, but it was at a much deeper, more inaccessible level. For a Golden it was like lightning. Adamis used his own so swiftly that Kyra believed it was even faster than a thought.

She went on trying to find her Power, but she was beginning to feel frustrated. She had to make a great effort to calm down and prevent her fiery nature from interfering. She relaxed, and finally, after some time, she

managed to achieve complete calm. *By Oxatsi, I'm going to manage this!* And then she saw it: misty at first, then clearing after a moment. It was like a blue lake inside her chest, perfectly calm. The first time she had seen it, it had seemed to her that she was losing her mind. How was it possible? But Adamis had explained that it was not really a lake, but simply the way the mind represented the phenomenon. Her Power was stored in her chest, and that was the way her mind perceived it. Now it did not surprise her to see it that way. She found it frustrating to have to take so long finding it, but when she succeeded her joy was immense. As it was at that moment.

"Good!" she cried, and a startled bird flew away.

Kyra transmitted the order to her Power in her mind, focusing on her aura. She felt a tingling which she was beginning to know well: that of her Power answering the call. There followed a feeling of emptiness. She had it! Now she had to control her Power so it would do what she wished. Concentrating as hard as she could, she gave the order to act. Again she felt the tingling, followed by the feeling of emptiness. *Yay! I did it!* Slowly, she rose from the ground until she was three feet from it. *To the center, very slowly*, she commanded. She floated through the air above the calm surface of the pond, keeping to the height of three feet. She reached the center of the pond without incident.

She banged her chest with her fist. "What d'you say to that? No disc! All by myself!" She was so pleased to have managed it that she would have jumped with joy if she had not been floating above the pond. "I'm a Hybrid with Power and I don't need any discs! Get yourselves ready, Golden!"

Suddenly a round beam of golden light rose out of the center of the pond and enveloped her.

"What the heck?"

And before she could react, the light blinked and carried her away. She took a deep breath of air, then the water swallowed her. She was sucked inside the pond, towards its depths. She lost consciousness a moment before she ran out of air.

She came to feeling terribly dizzy and on the point of throwing up. She tried to recover, but could not manage it completely and lay there on the ground, on her side, leaning on one arm. She felt awful. Breathing deeply so

as to settle her stomach, she looked around. She was in a round chamber with silver walls. *Golden,* she thought. Her head hurt like mad.

“What a way to get in,” she grumbled, thinking of Adamis. “You might have warned me. When I next see you, I’ll give you what for.”

When she heard the echo of her own voice in the hollow chamber she began to feel uneasy. Adamis had warned her that some of the underground temples were used by the Golden when they moved across the continent, although they did not do it very often. They were like a crossroads with a way out into the open. Each temple had a portal which allowed them to travel a certain distance. Hopping from temple to temple they were able to cross the entire continent from north to south and east to west. Kyra had not the slightest idea how big it was, but Adamis had told her it was immense. Hence they had built the temples with portals, and in that way they were able to travel great distances in a short time. Kyra had to admit that the Golden were as clever as they were evil. Other temples, more important and secret, had to do with their religious beliefs: the Golden Dogma, together with religious and funerary rites. Adamis believed, although he could not prove it, that some Houses also had secret temples. In those they experimented with forbidden technology far from the Eternal City, behind their backs, avoiding discovery. Remembering this, she shivered.

She looked around and armed herself with the disc in one hand and one of her throwing daggers in the other. *I’ve got to calm down. Adamis’ map only shows the known temples, the ones that are used as a means of transport. It would be a stroke of bad luck if I happened to cross a damn Golden in transit.* As soon as she thought this she regretted it; she was not exactly the luckiest of women. Her misadventures spoke for themselves.

She waited in silence, listening, as Ikai had taught her to. Nothing. She seemed to be alone. *Better to be safe.* As she did not want to risk trying it by herself, she brought Adamis’s disc out and used it. A near-transparent thread of mist issued from the object. It took shape, like a spirit, yet it was not frightening; rather it seemed to be there to protect and serve. *Search,* she commanded, and the spirit moved through the chamber. Then it went toward the way out and lost itself in the tunnel of silver walls. She waited, alert, for the searching spirit to explore the place and come back to let her know whether it had met some living being. It was not long before it returned.

Kyra spread her arms wide, and the spirit entered her chest and vanished into her. At once everything it had seen and experienced appeared in her mind. *There's the Portal.* The temples were a small labyrinth of chambers and tunnels on different levels. Using a searching spirit saved her having to explore the whole place and getting lost more than once in the process. *A great trick, Adamis, thanks for teaching me,* she thought, grateful to her lover and tutor.

Feeling easier now that she knew she was alone, she resettled her satchel across her back and went down the tunnels which led toward the chamber with the Portal. She found it two levels below. To enter it she had to use Adamis's disc, just as she would have to in order to manipulate the Portal. Only the Golden could operate their artifacts; she herself could not. She had already tried, but her mind was incapable of deciphering the symbols and hieroglyphs she needed to understand in order to operate them. Adamis had explained that it was the symbolic language of the Golden, and that learning it would take too much time. Time which they did not have. With foreknowledge, he had prepared the discs he had given the four of them with the ability to translate the language so their minds would understand it. In this way they would be able to enter and leave the temples and operate the Portals. But if she should lose the disc, or if it were destroyed, she would be unable to use either temples or Portals.

The Portal shone in the wall with a silver sheen so soft it was barely noticeable. She used the disc and then, once again, Adamis' map. With it open, floating above the disc, she searched for her destination: the temple closest to the Boundary of the House of Fire. She memorized its location and made the map disappear. Now she had to activate the Portal and indicate the place she wished to go to. She placed her hand on the viscose surface of the Portal, which felt like melted silver, and activated it. Immediately it gave a flash and seemed to wake from a long slumber. The golden rim flashed, and the runes began to twinkle with golden flashes. She had to move the runes and place them in the right order to set her destination. The Portal projected them to her mind as a message, awaiting her reply.

She bit her lip. Not being able to manipulate the arcane object made her angry. The technology of the Golden was more than she could understand. Not even her brother could. *We can't learn everything in just a single day.*

She used the disc and began to translate the signs. Without very well knowing how, they began to make sense to her, and she let herself be carried away. She knew her destination; now she had to pass it on to the Portal. She visualized it in her mind. *There!* – and her mind, with the aid of the disc, translated the location into the Portal's language of symbols. The runes moved and aligned themselves correctly. *That's it. Great!*

She got ready to enter. Suddenly the Portal gave a flash, and from its surface issued a strange golden gleam. At the same time waves began to spread from its center, like a pebble thrown into a lake.

"What's this?" she cried in alarm. She had never seen the Portal do that.

And before she could understand what was happening, a figure came out of the Portal. Her heart nearly burst with the shock. The figure was slender and golden-skinned. It was a Golden! A bloody Golden! What on earth was he doing there? She cursed her luck.

Beside her, the Golden straightened slowly and shook off the effects of crossing the Portal. He turned his head and saw her. His golden face was unable to hide his surprise; his thin eyebrows arched and his small clear eyes opened wide. He raised one hand and pointed at her. She reacted with all her energy, hurling herself head-first into the Portal without glancing back.

She came out on the other side of another Portal in a temple miles away, rolling on the ground in pain. Traveling through the portals was painful for Men. For the Golden it was not, but they could not do it all the time as it affected their Power, so that according to what Adamis had told her, they needed to rest afterwards. When she shook off the pain from her body she cried at the top of her voice:

"Just made it!"

Then she remembered she was in another of the temples and that there might be another God there, or a Guard. The Golden normally placed Guards in important temples, to protect their contents. But Adamis had told her there were no Guards in the temples with portals, only in the main ones. She relaxed an instant, then tensed. *Oh no!* The God might follow her here just by taking the Portal she had left. And he might do it very soon.

"By Oxatsi! I have to run!"

She sprinted as if a hungry lion were after her. She left the chamber, not knowing the way but aware that she had to get to the upper levels. She ran searching for stairs without looking back. *If he catches me I'm dead.* She took out the disc as she ran down a tunnel and summoned the Spirit of Search. *Get me out of here, fast.* The spirit shot away, responding to its mistress's urgency, and she ran after it.

The mental message was so clear that she had to shut her eyes and withstand its scorching strength.

You will not escape from here alive, came the message from the Golden.

Just my luck! He followed me! She ran even faster, saw a flight of stone stairs and ran up them without stopping to catch her breath. As she was going up them two at a time, the spirit came back to her. She stopped and spread her arms wide. *Which way?* The spirit entered her body, and in her mind she saw the way. The way out. *I have it!* She was about to break into a run once again when she had a strange presentiment: one of death. *An attack!* She glanced at the disc and commanded: *Shield!* A protective translucent sphere enveloped her.

She was about to turn when out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of fire coming toward her at great speed. A zigzagging arrow of fire struck her in the back. The shield protected her, but she felt the shock in her body.

Die, you slave, the God said.

"You bastard!" she shouted.

You are still alive? How did you survive my heat-seeking missile?

She wanted to answer. Even more than that, she wanted to kill that scum. But she thought better of it. She would gain nothing by confronting a God. Not there, in a Golden Temple, on his own terrain. And what would be the point? No, her friends needed her. Fighting a Golden would only delay her, and the odds were that she would die. She was not ready. Not yet. She would have given anything to have turned back and defeated him, but that was not the wisest choice. She controlled the rage burning in her stomach and took a deep breath. What on earth was a God of the House of Fire doing there, anyway? He could not be on his way to the Boundary. The Gods did not deign to set foot in the boundaries; it meant lowering themselves. Was crossing with him simply bad luck? No: Ikai always said that in most cases there was some reason for bad luck. At that moment she had no way of

knowing what that reason was, but there had to be one, and probably something that was bad news for them.

She looked back and thought it over. *He doesn't know I'm a Hybrid with Power. He must be puzzled. Let him stay that way. It'll give me a chance to escape*. Without a word she leapt toward the exit as fast as her legs would allow.

Who are you?

She said nothing and went on running. At the end of a tunnel she found a flight of stairs. The way out was at the top, and somehow she had to reach it. Suddenly something struck her in the back, so that she almost tripped and fell. The sphere had blocked it, whatever it was. She recovered and began to climb the stairs.

You have a shield, yet you are not one of our people. What are you?

The blow had been some kind of test-missile. Now the God was really confused. That gave her a chance. She was almost there. A few more steps and she would reach safety.

Very well, as you please. In that case it will be your dead body we will study.

She knew that death was on its way to find her, but she concentrated on the door in front of her, the way out of the temple. With the disc in one hand, panting from the exertion, she commanded the disc to open it. It flashed and carried out the order. The door rang with a rocky *crack* and a sliver of light came through at one edge. A moment later it began to move to one side, with the light from outside illuminating the entrance to the tunnel. "Come on, come on, quick, come on!"

Instinctively she turned to glance behind her. Something gripped her throat so that she could not swallow. Rolling up the stairs at great speed came a huge ball of fire, filling the entire width of the tunnel, consuming all the air in its passage, illuminating the walls with the brilliance of a fiery death.

"No!"

She turned toward the door. The ball of fire hit her squarely. The brutal explosion filled both tunnel and stairs with fire. The door finished opening and she was thrown outside. She rolled along the ground violently and ended up lying on the grass. She had lost her shield, which had been

swallowed up in the explosion. An unpleasant smell of burning made her reach for the back of her neck. It and the back of her head were burnt, part of her long hair was gone and the pain in her back warned her that it had reached there too. *The swine's roasted me!*

Rage made her stand and face the temple entrance, which was carved out of the base of a hill of black rock. She took a step toward the entrance with her fists clenched, ready to face the Golden. Then she stopped. *No. Think. This is not the time. There'll be another opportunity, when you're stronger.* She convinced herself. She turned and ran in the opposite direction like a gazelle chased by a lion.

The God of the House of Fire came out of the temple and scanned the plain. There was no trace of the slave girl. He sent an impulse of power to find life around him, but could find nothing.

Interesting, very interesting. Lord Asu will want to know about this odd incident.

Chapter 16

Adamis gazed at the unparalleled beauty of the Eternal City, while the ship sailed the waters of the main channel towards the center of the city. They were leaving behind the pier of the fifth ring, their point of departure. The sea breeze caressed his face and he sighed in gratitude. Alantres was as beautiful as he remembered it, although when he looked at it now with his own eyes and not those of memory, it was even more so.

“Stand straighter,” came the mental warning from Ariadne by his side.

Instantly he grasped the urgency of the Healer’s message. He straightened and raised his chin. He endured the stab of pain that followed by clenching his jaw tightly.

“Remember that you are a Golden Lord and you are among Golden.”

“I know, I am sorry.”

They were standing on the stern of the graceful ship, a little behind the rest of the retinue. Ariadne gestured ahead. The hundred Golden who made up the entourage of the House of the Fifth Ring were listening to the moving words of their Prince. From the prow, the heir of the kingdom of Water was addressing his people on the subject of the glorious day of celebration and the wonders they would all witness. Adamis recognized Prince Saxti of the House of Aru, the House of the Fifth Ring. A shiver ran down his spine, because he would be recognized if they came face to face. He had to avoid that at any cost.

He nodded back to Ariadne. “We must be as careful as we can.”

While the Prince of Water boasted about the intellect of the Erudites of his House and the great technological advances they had achieved, Adamis stretched forward and took a good look at the members of the retinue who were traveling on the single-sailed ship. All of them wore white tunics with golden hoods, as tradition dictated for that day. The wide blue sashes around their waists marked them out as members of the House of Water. He

looked down at himself: he was wearing the same, as were Ariadne and Sormacus.

“Today is an important day,” came Prince Saxti’s clear mental voice. “Today is the Celebration of Intellectual Enlightenment, and all the Houses honor it. It is an important celebration for all the Golden, for through technological advances we continue to evolve and approach immortality, day by day”

“Today we celebrate the great advances of our glorious civilization,” Ariadne commented sarcastically.

“Are you sure this is a good plan? It is very risky.”

“It is the only way to make you understand the aberrations the five houses are creating and the abyss they are leading us to as a civilization. I need you to see for yourself. It is very risky, I know, but I can assure you it will change your vision of the future of the Golden.”

Adamis sighed and nodded. He had never attended this celebration, even though his father had explained the true importance of the event to him. It took place every three hundred years, and although it celebrated advances in knowledge, it was merely another form taken by the dangerous political game between the Houses. Each one boasted to the others of the advances they had achieved. At the end of the ceremony the best of these were chosen and the houses received prizes accordingly. Those who could boast the most exceptional advances gained positions and power. And those with the least notable advances were relegated and lost face before the winners. Adamis knew that even though the Erudites achieved great advances in all fields every few hundred years, from healing to warfare, what was really being celebrated was something completely different: which House was the most powerful in the field of technology. And that was nothing other than the dangerous game of seeing which House was the most powerful. And politics and power were synonymous with blood and death.

Prince Saxti went on with his speech: “…and from among all the Erudites of the five houses, ours are the wisest and most intelligent. Their achievements will lead us to the longed-for immortality. The advances they have made will leave the other Houses baffled and speechless.” He waved at his Erudites, signaling them to join him at the stern. About twenty aged Golden, who had been standing in front of a group of large bundles which had been covered with white canvas to hide their contents, joined the Prince

of Water. Adamis wondered what could be hidden there as if it were a great secret. Secrets were not usually good news.

The Prince's boasting and praises of his Erudites went on. The whole entourage was listening, hanging on his every word. Adamis, on the other hand, was drinking in the unparalleled beauty of the city of the five rings on the emerald-blue waters as the ship moved on along the great central canal. They were level with the fourth ring: the House of Idnem, House of the element Earth. He gazed at the sober, regal buildings of rock and granite typical of that ring. Streets, buildings: everything was of stone and earth. The whole area had an orange-brown tone. Great ramparts had been built around colossal buildings, at different levels along the ring. On those ramparts grew what little vegetation there was.

Four huge monuments stood out from the rest at each end of the ring. To the north was a proud pyramid over four hundred feet tall and eight hundred wide, constructed from great blocks of granite. If the pyramid was an incomparable feat of architecture, no less was the Great Sphere at the south end. Adamis could not understand how it had been built, for it was perfectly spherical and built from blocks of pure granite. Rivaling it in perfection, to the east rose the Great Needle, whose girth was no more than forty-five feet. It seemed impossible that it should stand, yet it did not fall, not even under the force of the worst hurricane winds. Finally, to the west rose the Rectangle, an imposing structure in the form of a stadium where the tournaments of the House of Earth were celebrated.

He sighed, saddened at the sight of a large group of slaves working on the building of a reinforcement. *How many thousands of slaves must have died raising these mammoth buildings which only serve the vanity of one or other despot?* They passed the pier, and he saw the elegant ship which carried the retinue of the House of the Fourth Ring leaving the dock to follow them toward the Great Monolith, where the ceremony would take place. When he saw the entourage of the fourth ring approaching on the ship with its decoration of brown and gold motifs, a question came to his mind.

"How did you manage to get us included in the ceremony?" he asked Ariadne.

She nodded to her side. "Not me. He was the one who managed it."

Adamis' eyes turned to Sormacus, who nodded to him in acknowledgment. "I have certain contacts and some influence within the fifth ring."

"He is the personal aide to the First Priest," Ariadne explained.

Then Adamis understood. The First Priest was the most powerful figure in a House, apart from the royal family itself. He was in charge of all the ceremonies and many of the royal projects, as well as other more delicate matters.

"The First Priests have contacts and power both inside and outside the Houses. That allows us to *arrange* certain things. Attendance at this event, for example."

"The First Priests talk with each other, and they are very dangerous," Adamis warned. "They devote more time to the political game than to the Golden Dogma. You should be very careful, they are ruthless."

"Your concern honors me, but you need not worry," Sormacus said. "I know my neck is in constant danger. I have witnessed truly "unpleasant" things. The abuse committed in the name of the Golden Dogma, and the wellbeing of the Houses, are the reasons why I am with the Children of Arutan."

"You take many risks, both of you," Adamis said. He knew very well what the First Priests were capable of. They were nothing but treacherous political animals who did not hesitate to do whatever might be necessary to win the favor of the royal family, and most of all, to improve their own position.

"The Children of Arutan have been working in the shadows for a very long time," Ariadne said, "watching, protecting our Mother Nature Arutan devotedly and loyally, respecting her principles, acting as her children, which we are. We are all aware of the risks we take, and of what is coming. Many of us will not survive. But it is our duty to save our civilization and our Mother Nature, since no-one else is going to."

"We stay hidden from the powerful," Sormacus said, "from the royal families, the nobility… but we watch them, we move among them, always alert, listening, learning. We have agents in all the Houses, at different levels: healers, priests, soldiers, even some merchants and nobles. They are the eyes and ears of the Ancient, and they tell us what is really happening."

“The Ancient… you mean Aruma…”

“Her, and the other wise men and women who lead us.”

“How many are there of those Ancient who lead you?”

“The less you know the better, the less risk you take.”

Adamis was not convinced by the reply, although he understood the reasons for it. He might be captured and forced to betray them.

“Very well,” he said in acceptance.

They reached the Third Ring, the kingdom of the House of Aurez, the House of Air. The ship carrying the entourage emerged rapidly from the harbor as soon as they passed in front of it. It appeared to fly over the water, with its sail billowing even though there was barely any wind. It was then that Adamis saw something that left him dismayed. A gigantic statue in the shape of a windmill was being set up on the sea itself in front of the main dock. The body of the structure was narrow and pointed, like a great pole that rose almost two hundred feet above the sea. On its tip a colossal propeller with three giant blades turned under the steady lash of the wind. But it was not that which caused his dismay but the Oppressors, who were whipping the slaves in a constant, merciless punishment as they worked to prop up the base of the structure. The enormous construction was being finished to the rhythm of the suffering of more than a thousand slaves who were trying hard not to die that day.

“They are raising statues and buildings, greater and greater, ever more and more excessive all the time,” Adamis said incredulously as he witnessed the suffering of all those men. “What is the need? Why all this squandering? Why do we need more statues and colossal monuments? Why so much death?”

“For the greater glory of the Golden,” Sormacus replied.

“Alantres is growing perverted, excessive, following its Lords’ ideals of vanity,” Ariadne said. “It is madness, and it keeps growing and growing unstoppably. The price, after all, is low as far as the Golden are concerned. What does it matter, the slavery of thousands of people, their suffering, their death? The answer is simple: nothing at all. Yes, nothing.”

Adamis sighed. “To some of us, it does matter,” he said, although he was fully aware Ariadne was right.

“To very few. We pretend to be Gods, which we are not, and live as such. Nothing else matters to us. We want to reach immortality and become divinities. And that justifies everything. The suffering we cause does not matter.”

“Without slaves we would not be Gods,” Sormacus said.

“The path of living together with the other races, with Men, is not the path marked by the Golden Dogma,” said Ariadne. “It is not the path by which the Five High Kings lead us. We raise great monuments in a corrupt city instead of respecting Mother Nature, whom we do not protect. We live ignoring her wise teachings, because our leaders believe themselves to be cleverer and more powerful than she is. We must abandon that path, which is full of pain and death. We must abolish slavery. Free the Men. We must stop the vain search for immortality for the greater glory of the powerful.”

“They will never allow it,” said Sormacus.

“Whether they allow it or not, we will fight to achieve it,” Adamis assured him.

The ship continued on its course, sailing the waters lightly. The breeze brought a smell of burning and sulfur. Adamis did not even have to turn his head. He knew perfectly well which ring they had reached: the second, the House of Aureb, the House of Fire, that of his sworn enemy: Asu’s kingdom. Thinking about the Prince of Fire, he remembered the death of his Champion and friend, and a pain, not physical but deeper and more searing, came upon him. He breathed deeply, trying not to let himself be dominated by the hatred that was rising in him. An enormous burst of flame made most of the retinue turn back to watch the spectacle. He turned his head slightly and saw the huge construction in the form of a volcano beside the main harbor. That monstrosity in the shape of a mountain which rose to the sky and spewed fire and lava was something new which had been built during his exile.

There came another explosion of fire and lava, and they heard moans of terror.

“The perversity and madness of the leaders of the Houses know no limits,” said Ariadne. “They will end up killing thousands.”

“Or provoking a war, which would be even worse,” said Sormacus.

“I am not so sure that a war between the Houses would be such a bad thing,” said Ariadne. “Maybe that way they would finally learn. Death is a stern teacher, but an effective one.”

“A war would be disastrous,” Adamis said. “Many of the Golden would die, and with them thousands and thousands of slaves. They would drag Men down both here and on the great continent. The bloodshed would be too great. We must avoid it.”

Sormacus nodded, but Ariadne did not seem entirely convinced.

“Fire cleans the undergrowth and creates fertility for the soil,” she said.

“Or destroys the forest,” said Sormacus.

“Consuming all life,” added Adamis.

“There might not be a choice,” said Ariadne.

“The Five High Kings will not allow it,” Adamis said. “They have kept the peace for a long time.”

“Sometimes,” Sormacus said thoughtfully, “even Kings have no choice in the face of extreme situations,”

“Sometimes even Kings fall,” added Ariadne.

Adamis was thinking of his Father. “Let us hope it is not so.”

The ship of the House of Fire, adorned for the ceremony, was leaving the pier with Asu at the prow, arrogant and vain as an immortal god. Adamis felt a torturing pain and had to hold hard to the gunwale. He was not sure whether the pain was physical or the result of Asu’s presence nearby. It was probably both.

Ariadne noticed his pain. “Hold on, you will make it,” she encouraged him.

Adamis remembered his dead friend Rotec, and the rage helped him to endure the stabbing pain. He straightened, holding himself in check, as if he were the most noble of the Golden. *One day I will obtain the justice you were not granted,* he promised his dead friend. *Asu will pay for what he did to you. I promise you that.*

As he remembered his dear friend, they reached the first ring, his home. He gazed with moist eyes at his wonderful city of Ether: the buildings and transparent monuments which gleamed under a thousand lights. He saw the streets of the port, of white marble, and the clear buildings that rose

throughout the ring to clothe the huge mountain-city above the sea. He sighed as he gazed at the proud palaces, the monuments, the fountains and exotic gardens, all translucent, as if made of crystal. And he saw his home at the summit, the majestic royal palace.

As he gazed at what had been his home for so long, a great feeling of melancholy came over him. *So very many good memories … my happy childhood, my family, my parents.* And as he thought about his Father, the nostalgia turned into sadness. *How it hurts … oh, how much … the fact that you did not support me … that you sentenced me to death.* But that pain, not a physical one, and one which he would always carry in his soul, was something he could not assuage with anything. It burnt as though his heart had been branded with red-hot iron. However hard he had tried, he had not been able to quench it; perhaps he never would. He would have to suffer, to wait and see.

He sighed. And the sigh was rather louder than he had intended. Someone turned in puzzlement and looked at him. Adamis stood straighter, hoping the hood would hide his face from curious eyes. The Golden, one of the group of the Caste of Commons, did not seem to suspect anything and turned back to look ahead of him. The group of the Caste of Nobles, nearer the prow, was applauding Prince Saxti's words. Adamis tried to relax. The tension was beginning to be too much for him, and he needed to be careful or else he would be caught. *I do not hate you, Father. I understand your reasons, I accept your actions, but you have broken my heart, because you might have been on my side and you chose to save the House rather than your own son. The sadness this has brought me will live with me forever. Nothing will be able to change that now. And one day, I will die by your hand, for you judged me, condemned me and ordered me to be executed. I die by your hand, father.*

While he was being shaken by these painful thoughts, he saw the ship with the retinue of the House of Ether. He wondered who his father had chosen to head the group, since he himself was an only child. One of his cousins, he guessed. He could not make out which one, but he was intrigued, as whoever had risen within his family's game of power was now a rival – more than that, an enemy – who if he were to discover him would kill him in order to keep his new position. He had no doubt about that, his own family or not.

A shadow suddenly covered the ship, leaving it in twilight and sinking him deeper into his sadness. They were moving down one of the four tunnels which crossed the first ring and opened into the center of the city, where the Great Monolith which sustained the city and the Five High Kings towered. The four ships followed in single file, a short distance apart, in a reverse procession towards the landing at the foot of the monolith. They, the representatives of the fifth ring, were the first to arrive at the pier. Presently the other ships would dock.

Adamis stared up at the huge black monolith. *So much power in that object, the axis on which our whole civilization turns,* he thought, not without admiration. That object was a remarkable technological achievement. It kept the great city afloat and safe from storms and tsunamis. But it was something more than that: a conductor of Power, an intelligent conductor. It projected its masters' wishes, and by it all the Enforcers and the entire city were governed. Its value was as great as its colossal presence, or more so.

As he watched the five ships docking, he gazed at the immense base of the monolith, which housed the Chamber of the High Kings. The ceremony would take place there, as was customary for all the important celebrations. He recalled the Ceremony of Vivification, which had taken place in that same hall, and all that had happened afterwards. *Who would have thought that one day I would be here like this? The last time I entered the chamber I was the hereditary Prince of the House of Eret. I was powerful, privileged, and had all I could wish for. But I was never happy. Now I am doomed, exiled, with a death sentence I cannot escape. But I have known happiness. And surprisingly it has been through a slave, my beloved Kyra. This happiness with her is so deep and immense that nothing can equal it. When the day comes I will die happy, because Kyra is everything to me and for her I will do whatever is necessary.*

The ships finished their docking maneuvers, but nobody disembarked. They had to wait for the order from the Masters of Ceremony. Protocol dictated this. The great ceremony required the delegations of all five houses to enter in groups and in order, to present themselves before the Five High Kings. *A bad encounter would be dangerous for all three of us, very dangerous. It would mean our end.*

“What are you looking for exactly?” he asked his companions. “Why do you risk so much?”

“I see the Prince of Ether still finds it hard to trust the Children of Arutan,” said Ariadne.

“Do not misunderstand me. I appreciate all the help you have given me, but I find it hard to believe that you are risking your lives to go against the Houses, against the Five High Kings. What do you expect to achieve?”

“We do not judge you,” Ariadne assured him. “To enable you to understand it, our wise people say we search for harmony. As simple and as difficult as that. The Children of Arutan seek to restore the natural order of things, that from which we were born, that which means living in harmony and respecting Mother Nature, and which we have abandoned over the last few thousand years because of our people’s foolish wishes for immortality. We seek to live in harmony: all the Golden, no matter which House, Caste, Family or Profession, all united, equal, as one. And we seek to extend that living together in harmony to the other races, to Men. That is what we seek.”

“Is there not something else behind this? Is there not a wish for Power, for reigning in place of the Five High Kings?”

“I can give you my word that it is not so,” she assured him.

“We are not going to change one corrupt system for another, if that is what you think,” Sormacus said.

“Very well, I believe you,” Adamis said, putting an end to the question of his distrust. “Let us not speak of this again,”

“Thank you,” said Ariadne. “We need you to have no doubt about us. Time is running out.”

“Terrible things are happening,” Sormacus said. “The final day is approaching. We see the signs, and they are clear. There is no doubt any more. That is why we must act. That is why we need to show the Prince of Ether the truth. Once you see with your own eyes, you will have no doubt.”

“The end of days is near,” Ariadne assured him.

Adamis considered his companions’ words. They had affected him.

“Well then, show me what I must see.”

She pointed to the temple.

“Now you will see.”

“Let us hope I live to tell the tale,” Adamis said. There was a searing pain in his stomach as they began to disembark.

Chapter 17

On the seventh day of his journey Ikai came to a huge walled city. It was a county capital, and there he would find answers. Or death. Hidden behind a thick oak tree he watched the southern entrance to the city. The great metal gates were wide open. There were no guards there, nor any on the battlements. *How strange.*… The walls were high and regal, with several imposing square turrets. It looked like a more robust and advanced building than that of the Senoca, capable of withstanding a sustained siege: a city that would be very difficult to take. To build something like that must have taken years of hard work and thousands of slaves. If they had built a fortress like that, how could there be no-one watching it? He shook his head, not understanding.

For over half the morning he watched the entrance, alert, trying to get some useful information to help him decide and act. Even so, he barely saw any activity; a few carts pulled by oxen or horses were all there was. The level of activity in that city was unusually low. But there was one thing which had caught his attention: the merchants with the carts were oldish men. He had still not seen anybody young, and that was beginning to concern him.

In the early evening he changed his position and watched the northern entrance. The result was the same: a few heavy carts carrying supplies went in or came out, with older men leading them. He sighed and weighed up his options. Night was falling, and he did not have enough information to know what was going on there. He thought about entering the city as one more traveler, but then remembered the old woman’s reaction and changed his mind. There was no guarantee that the same thing would not happen again. Since it was a city there ought to be Guards, even though he had not seen any so far, and they would capture him. No, it was not a good idea to go in through the gate. And nor were there any people coming or going that he could mingle with and go unnoticed, which was deeply suspicious. The

hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he thought about it. Where were all the people and the Guard?

He ate some of his provisions while he reflected on it and night fell. He had explored the surroundings, and the forest was full of life. He had found good game, wild fruits, even a nearby river with trout. Birds and squirrels went their way above his head and the gentle breeze did not warn of any danger. Whatever was happening, it did not affect the forest. But on the other hand, there was nobody hunting, or fishing, or gathering. Nor were there any farms in the vicinity. Very strange…

He made an impatient noise. He could not stay idle. The great gates were still wide open, as if inviting him to enter the metropolis. He shook his head. *No, too easy. They must leave them open for some reason. They don't fear a rebellion. They don't fear anything…* The thought worried him even more. If they feared nothing, it must be for some reason. After going over it again and again in his mind, he decided what he was going to do. *We'll do it Albana's way. It's the best option.*

The moon was shining high above in a clear sky, so he moved stealthily toward the wall by way of the shadows which hid it. At a hundred paces he had to stop behind a boulder, because there was no more cover. He put his head out and surveyed the parapet of the tower. He could not see a soul. But he could not risk it. He grasped Adamis's disc and used the Power. *Dark Spirit*, he commanded. The disc gave forth a gleam which he covered with his body, and out of the disc came a black thread which gradually took on the shape of a spirit, dull black in color. *To me*, he said, and the spirit covered him, clinging to him like a second skin. He had discovered this spirit by accident while he was practicing with the disc to improve his skill with the Power. Generally the spirits he managed to invoke were translucent or whitish. The House of Ether, his own Power, was related to the spiritual world, and could create a variety of spirits with very distinct skills. The more he learnt about the Power the more fascinated he was by it, and the things that might be done with it amazed him. Just as Adamis had asked them to, he practiced every day and was gradually improving, although he was years away from catching up with Kyra, who seemed to have a natural gift for it.

With the spirit clinging to his body, he made his way to the foot of the tower. At night and from afar, all they would see would be a black spot

moving, something blurred, barely perceptible, at least as far as most people were concerned. Now he had to climb the live rock wall of the tower to the parapet. There was just one unfortunate difficulty: he had no rope to climb with.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, activated the disc and searched for his own aura. It had once taken him an eternity to find it, but little by little he had improved so that now he could find it almost at once. When he succeeded, he fixed it in his mind. He focused. He needed to be very careful. *Up, gently, to the parapet,* he told the disc. A white mist enveloped him and his body began to rise, leaving the ground, very slowly, parallel to the wall. He rose and rose, gently. There was an emptiness in his stomach, but he must not lose his concentration. If he did so the disc would not respond, and he would crash to the ground and break his skull.

He reached the battlements. Carefully he opened his eyes and stepped unsteadily onto the parapet. He gasped with relief at finding himself on the wall and seeing the height he had climbed. As he had expected, there were no Guards. He decided to find out what was going on. Stealthily, he went into the tower and down the winding stone stairs until he reached a room whose door was ajar. He put his head in and withdrew it immediately. Nothing. Empty. Members of the Guard should have been stationed there, even if they were sleeping, but there was no one there. He went through the rest of the tower and found it deserted, and what was stranger still, there were signs that nobody had set foot in it in a long time.

He went out on the battlements, crouched down and scanned the city at his feet. There were barely a handful of torches burning to light up the main streets. The houses were all dark, just like the squares, fountains and back streets. Looking at the buildings, he noticed that they were well made, with stone walls, sloping roofs, with everything very well finished. Without a doubt they were the best and more advanced buildings he had ever seen. The people of that boundary were skilled constructors. Looking at the city from above, he realized that it had been built in six symmetrical areas. The first four were completely dark, as if deserted. The other two, to the north, showed some light. He decided to go and investigate.

He walked at a crouch along the wall, close to the battlements, toward the northern part. He passed two more towers and found them empty in turn. He realized that the Dark Spirit had left him. Now they would be able

to see him, if there was anybody to do so. He decided to take no risks, and summoned the Dark Spirit to cover him again. He did not know how long it would stay with him, any more than he could predict how long any of the things he managed to do with the Power would last. He was clearly aware that someone as powerful as Adamis would be able to create strong spirits which remained for longer. He also had the feeling that as he practiced more, not only was he managing to make the Power respond sooner and better, but it was responding with more powerful creations and skills, so that the spirit existed for longer. He had no idea what its limit might be, but it was inspiring him to want to try things out and learn. The whole world of the Power of the Golden and its mastery fascinated him as much as it frustrated him. It was something that went beyond logic, and he was someone guided by logic and common sense. But over time, he was sure he would find the logic behind it all.

He walked the length of the wall until he reached the more brightly-lit part. Here he lay flat on the ground behind the parapet and watched. He did not see any Guards, but he did see something which at last made sense: Enforcers. Several Executors were standing guard in front of a small palace, while a little to the east another, bigger, group of Executors were watching a great square building. It looked like a military barracks. An Eye-of-the-Gods came out of the palace, went to another building, escorted by six Executors, and disappeared inside. What was going on here? Where was the Guard? And the Proxies? Inside that building? Since there were no answers, and trying to break into those guarded buildings without more information seemed too risky, he decided to wait till daybreak and see whether he could find out anything more. He hid himself in the tower behind the two buildings and waited for dawn.

What he discovered at sunrise left him as puzzled as he had been in the village. The city woke up, and its dwellers began to go about their daily chores. This could perfectly well have been any city of any boundary, with one exception: all the inhabitants of this city were either old people or children. There was not a single young person. Nor could he spot any Guard or Proxy. Only Enforcers, and old people looking after children. He was so perplexed he wanted to go down and ask, but bearing in mind the old woman’s reaction he decided against it.

Suddenly he heard the snort of a horse. Crossing the northern gate came Enforcers in a dozen heavy carts pulled by strong horses. He shifted position so as to get a better view. The carts stopped in front of the square building, then Executors alighted and waited for an Eye to come out of the palace. He gave some orders which Ikai could not hear, and the Executors went into the building. A few moments later he heard cries and moans. He turned all his attention on and to his surprise found out part of the mystery of what was going on. The Executors were dragging out young people and pushing them into the heavy carts. But they were not young peasants: no, they were soldiers of the Guard!

He rubbed his eyes, completely at a loss. As he tried to puzzle it out, the Executors dragged the soldiers out by force and loaded them into the carts. He had not been mistaken, the building was a military barracks, that of the Guard. What he could never have imagined was that the Enforcers would have the Guard imprisoned in their own barracks. *But why? The political structure is the same in all the boundaries. The Gods need the Guard. The Enforcers are not enough to control the whole population.* And thinking about it, he realized. It was true in the case of a large population, but here there was no such thing. He had no idea why, or where that population was, but if there were only old people and children, then there was no need for the Guard.

He had an ominous feeling about this, and hoped with all his heart that he was wrong. One final cart arrived, and two Eyes stepped down from it. They conferred with the Eye in command and arrived at some sort of decision. Several Executors went into the building and with much pushing and shoving brought out half a dozen Proxies. Ikai recognized them at once by their characteristic blue and white robes. They were followed by one last man, whose hands and feet were chained. He was tall and wore a brown tunic, his hair was brown and he had an unkempt beard. He stopped before getting on the cart and looked up at the sun. Ikai saw a green glint in his eyes and recognized him.

It was Maruk! He was so stunned that he shifted involuntarily and his knee dislodged a stone, which rattled loudly on to a nearby roof. He crawled back along the battlements. One of the Executors heard the stone fall and looked up at where he was. seeing a shadow slowly disappearing. He watched it for a moment, then lost interest. Ikai remained as still as a

statue to avoid attracting any more attention until he heard the convoy begin to move. *I've got to follow them and find out where they're taking him!*

Carefully, he withdrew and climbed down the outer wall, using the Power as he had on his way in. Once he was below he ran to the corner, keeping close to the wall as he went, and saw the group of carts leaving the city. Half a dozen carts in a row. He counted three dozen Executors and two Eyes-of-the-Gods. Too many to attempt a rescue. But he was not discouraged. *Time to chase Enforcers.*

For ten days Ikai followed the caravan, always keeping hidden and at a safe distance so that the Enforcers would not realize they were being followed. He used all his knowledge as an old Hunter to stay hidden from his prey. The carts were slow and their tracks unmistakable, so it was not difficult to keep a safe distance. The Enforcers barely rested more than was absolutely necessary so as not to kill the horses and to give water to the prisoners. He was used to marching for days on end, so that it was easy to keep up with the pace of the caravan. He was worried about how little food the prisoners were being given. *They won't be able to put up with a long trip with nothing but water and a little bread and meat.* He had no idea where they were heading, but he feared that by the time they got there Maruk would already be dead.

On the eleventh day, with night falling, they left the carts on the road and made camp beside a stream. To his surprise they lit several campfires; it looked as though they were going to spend the night there. This gave him a chance to gather some information. It was dangerous and rather risky, but he could seize the opportunity to investigate. He pondered the situation for a long while, and in the end he decided to act. It went against what his rational mind dictated, but sometimes you have to take risks in order to win. For a moment he thought it was Kyra speaking and not himself: *I guess we all change with experience. My little sister has turned more cautious, and me rather less.* He smiled at the thought.

He hid the satchel of food, along with bow, quiver and sword, under a great oak. Very carefully, keeping to the shadows at all times and hiding

from the moon, he approached the Enforcers' camp. He had to find out Maruk's state and gather some information as to what was happening. From a prudent distance, well-hidden, he watched the camp. He saw his friend tied to a fir tree. His eyes were closed and his head bowed, as if he were sleeping. The Proxies had been tied to a couple of thick oaks. The remaining prisoners had been taken to the stream to drink and clean up. He crawled through the underbrush, his senses on the alert, toward the camp. In one hand he carried a knife, in the other the disc. He successfully avoided two Executors stationed on the outskirts of the camp, then suddenly heard a noise and became rigid as a rock, his face pressed against the ground. Two Executors guarding the perimeter were approaching. He held his breath and tightened his grip on both knife and disc. They passed a couple of paces by him without seeing him.

He breathed out and swallowed hard. His mouth was dry, his heart beating like a drum. Very slowly he crawled to the tree Maruk was tied to. The light of one of the fires lit him up. Ikai glanced at him for a moment and hid behind the tree again. As he had feared, Maruk did not look good. His face and neck were covered with bruises from the blows he had received and his breathing was very shallow. He was thin and filthy.

"Maruk," he whispered in his ear.

But he did not open his eyes.

"It's me, Ikai."

Maruk stirred as if he were in the middle of a nightmare. This encouraged Ikai, who for a moment had feared he might be dead.

He shook his arm. "Maruk, wake up, it's me, Ikai."

Maruk opened his eyes and stared vacantly at the fire.

"Are you all right? I'm behind you."

"No! not anymore!" Maruk cried all of a sudden. In the middle of the quiet night the cry rang out like thunder.

"Don't yell, it's me, Ikai!"

"No! Leave me!" Maruk shouted, as though in a nightmare.

Ikai put his hand on his mouth, but it was already too late. From the other side of the camp came two Executors. He had to let go of Maruk, who began to yell again. The Executors sounded the alarm, and three more

appeared from the east. He weighed up his chances. Fighting five Executors would have been unthinkable lunacy not long before. But now, with the aid of the disc, it was something he might be able to pull off. There came the shrieking voice of an Eye from further south. He was ordering more Executors to come up to the camp. This changed things. He could not fight off all of them, that he knew. He made the most rational decision: flee!

He ran off through the underbrush. An Executor's spear brushed past his head. He leapt over a trunk and another spear thudded into it. With his heart in his mouth he ran, dodging trees, rocks and roots, until he came out into an area of open land. When he glanced behind he saw he was being chased. He ran as fast as he could to cross the clearing and reach the forest. He might be able to lose them there among the vegetation.

He was forced to flee all night, with barely a rest, trying to leave his pursuers behind. For a moment he thought he had succeeded, then he heard their heavy footsteps on his trail and was forced to go on.

It was dawn when he came out of the forest and found himself on the main road. His lungs were burning and his legs sore from the effort. He had to stop and rest. He had been doing so at intervals, trying to leave the Executors behind. He had gained something of an advantage, but he knew they would soon be on top of him. They were like hunting hounds and never seemed to tire. Staying on the road was not an option, they would see him and he would be unable to shake them off. The best thing to do was to go back into the woods. He took three deep breaths, then breathed slowly out. Now somewhat recovered, he ran on like lightning. At the edge of the path he jumped over a trunk with his eyes on the forest at the point he would enter it by, finally losing his pursuers in the process. He stepped on the grass and his right foot sank into a hole covered by dead leaves. He stumbled, lost his balance and fell on his face. He tried to get back on his feet at once, but felt a sharp pain in his ankle. He put his hands on the sprain and stayed there lying on the ground, grunting with pain.

He got to his feet as best he could and tried to lean on his foot. A terrible pain shot up his leg and burst in his mind. *It's a pretty bad sprain!* He tried to hobble off to get further away, but had to stop because the pain was too intense. *I have to bind that ankle and secure it so that at least I can limp.* He took off his shirt and tore it into strips, then bent over, took off his boot and started to bind his ankle tight, enduring the pain. Once it was tightly

bound he put his boot back on. It hurt terribly, but at least now he could walk to some extent.

Unfortunately it was too late. A dozen Executors were watching him from the other side of the road. *There are times in life when luck isn't on our side,* he thought resignedly. *I'll have to fight. May Oxatsi take pity on this, her son.* He stood straight with the knife in his right hand and the disc in his left, flexed his knee and tried not to put his weight on his injured foot. *Calm and concentration,* he told himself.

Three of the Executors raised their spears. Ikai acted at once, using the disc to raise a protective sphere. The three spears hit this with tremendous force, weakening it, but they did not manage to pierce it. At the same time he felt the blow in his body. Confused, the Executors hesitated. He took advantage of this and used the Power of the disc. He summoned a Spirit of Agony, a translucent gray creation in a long tattered robe, its body lacking any flesh. It looked like something out of a nightmare. It floated beside him, staring at him with an unhinged expression of horror that was the very picture of unfathomable agony itself. Ikai pointed at the three Executors with his knife and gave the order: *Attack!* The spirit spread its arms, gave a cavernous moan, and shot out to fall on the Executors. They defended themselves with their knives, but the spirit's embrace filled them with unbearable agony. They fell to the ground, writhing as they tried to shake it off. The other Executors hesitated, unable to understand how a man could do something that was only within the power of the Gods.

Taking advantage of their confusion, he used the Power of the disc to create a Dark Spirit. The disc gave a flash. A black thread issued from it and became a spirit, black as a starless night. But this time, instead of ordering it to cover him, he gave it the order to attack. The spirit hurled itself at the Executors. Covering them with its blackness, it consumed their lives.

The Executors fought back. Ikai was only capable of creating a few different kinds of spirits which Adamis had taught him to summon. He knew that it was possible to create a wider, far more powerful variety. So far his own were weak, as he had still not mastered the Power sufficiently to create anything stronger. Since they existed in this world the spirits, although translucent, were partially vulnerable to physical weapons. The Executors could wound them and end their existence. The battle between

Spirits and Executors was brutal and ruthless. Ikai joined his creations, and between the three of them they finished off all the Executors. The last of these died in the act of destroying the last spirit. He was left alone, with a dozen dead bodies around him.

He gasped in relief. He was safe. He heard the galloping of a horse in the distance, but only saw the empty road disappearing beyond a bend. He felt a blow in his back followed by a shaking. *What?* An Executor's spear had struck the protective sphere. He turned and saw a dozen more Executors coming out of the forest at a run. *Oh no!* He concentrated and summoned a new Spirit of Agony, but had no time for anything else. The Executors fell on him.

He took the first blows from the Executors' spear and knife, which the protective sphere stopped. But with every blow the sphere weakened a little, and he felt a painful shaking that spread through his whole body. He sent more Power to strengthen the sphere. Those first attacks soon became a tremendous rainfall of blows, whose full force he felt in his flesh. He tried to use the disc again, but the pain and the shaking would not let him concentrate. *I'm in serious trouble. I have to find a way of defending myself, or else I won't make it out of here alive.* The blows continued with savage force, with the Executors attacking like predatory beasts whose prey was on the brink of collapse. The Spirit of Agony finished off three Executors before it was destroyed.

A spear managed to pierce the protective sphere and went straight to his heart. In a reflex movement he deflected the sharp point with his knife. He had escaped by a hair's-breadth, but now the sphere was cracked and about to fall. The next spear went through it at the level of his head. He saw it nearing his face. Without having time to react, he bent his knees and the spear brushed past his head. As he crouched he felt a stab of pain in his ankle. He could not use the disc to protect himself. The Executors went on hitting the sphere with their spears and half-moon-shaped knives. They could see it was about to give way, and hammered it with all their might.

He tried to use the disc one last time before his defense was destroyed. Crouching, under the rain of blows, he did his best to focus. He heard the neighing of a horse behind him, but did not let it disturb his concentration. He managed to use the Power and create a Dark Spirit. *Yes!* Between the two they could defeat the remaining Executors. *Attack them!* he ordered it.

But before it could attack, the Executors were hurled into the air, crashing on to the ground and dying on impact. Ikai, mouth open in surprise, spun round.

“Getting into trouble without me?” a familiar voice mocked him.

Ikai stared at the rider.

“And where did that really hideous spirit come from? He looks a lot like you, brother.”

“Kyra!”

Chapter 18

The delegations began to make their way into the chamber in the opposite order to the ring they represented. Adamis, together with Ariadne and Sormacus, as part of the delegation of the Fifth Ring, went in with the first group led by Prince Saxti of the House of Water, The High Chamber, where the Five High Kings gathered for important ceremonies, and where they hibernated, was spotless. On the round walls of old gold there shone symbols of Power engraved in silver. The transparent floor allowed them to appreciate the unparalleled beauty of the calm turquoise ocean. The black marble ceiling formed the base of the Great Monolith, which rose above the chamber.

Adamis remembered that regal place well. He would never forget the last time he had set foot in it: during the Ceremony of Vivification, when he had nearly lost Kyra. This building had always impressed him; it was one of the greatest achievements of the Golden, the very center of Erenal, the Eternal City, which was fed with Power by the Great Monolith.

They arrived before the Five High Kings. Adamis shrank into himself and bent his head as he felt the immense power which emanated from them. Their all-powerful majesties waited on elaborate thrones set on a round dais which hovered ten feet above the floor. Adamis glanced at them for an instant, his face hidden by his hood. All wore elegant robes whose color symbolized the element their houses represented, decorated with elaborate gold embroidery. Their jeweled crowns marked them out as High Kings of the Golden. Around their necks hung the five ancestral medallions which proclaimed them as Lords of the Elements.

From left to right, he recognized first His Majesty Edan, of the House of Aru, the House of the Fifth Ring. He had always liked the Lord of Water, who was cautious and reasonable, his Father’s main ally. Sitting on his right was His Majesty Lur, of the House of Idnem, House of the Fourth Ring. The Lord of Earth, on the other hand, he had never fully trusted; he was

hard and selfish. He was a fellow-conspirator of the House of Fire and usually followed its lead. On his right was His Majesty Kaitze, of the House of Aurez, the House of the Third Ring. The Lord of Air was shrewd and knew he occupied a privileged position. The alliance between the Houses of Ether and Water on the one hand and the Houses of Earth and Fire on the other left him in a useful position when a tie in the vote needed to be broken, something he took full advantage of in pursuit of his own interests. On his right was His Majesty Gar, of the House of Aureb, the House of the Second Ring. The Lord of Fire was ruthless and brutal. He stopped at nothing to reach his goals, and little by little his was becoming the most powerful of the houses. And finally, on Gar's right, was His Majesty Laino, of the House of Eret, the House of the First Ring. The Lord of Ether, his own father. Before a whirlwind of emotions could overwhelm him, Adamis shut his eyes and made an enormous effort to stay calm.

The Five High Kings greeted the group with a slight nod. That simple gesture gave forth such power that Adamis and the others in the entourage had to bend double at once to pay their respects. Edan, Lord of Water, gave them permission to rise. When he did so Adamis could hold back no more and glanced at his father. Seeing him on his throne, so regal, powerful, unshakeable, such desolation came over him that he forgot all the suffering he had gone through. He would gladly have gone up to him, embraced him, let him know how much he had meant for him, how much he had always loved him. But now nothing was the same any longer, and that embrace would never take place, for his father had ordered him to be executed: he himself, his only son. Sorrow mingled with the sadness, and his sense of loss was so deep that for a moment he could not breathe. *How much I regret that our paths have driven us to these extremes.* He took a deep breath and sighed, trying to let out all the sorrow and sadness. *I hope our destinies do not cross again, Father, for both our sakes.*

The entourages of each house entered and placed themselves in order, following the established protocol: Each one before their High King, showing absolute respect. Adamis remained hidden in the anonymity granted him by his group. But seeing the Princes of the Houses and other nobles he knew so well pass by was putting his nerves to the test. He remembered the time when he had been a Golden Prince, when nothing and nobody might touch him. How far away those days were! *Once I was a stupid prince like them, unable to open my eyes and see what my people*

really are: cruel, ruthless and self-worshiping. Luckily Kyra opened my eyes. And I shall never close them again.

At that moment he saw the Prince of Fire strutting about in front of his father. Asu was behaving with staggering pride and haughtiness, even for him. For a single instant hatred overcame Adamis, so that he wanted to unsheathe the weapon Aruma had given him and run him through with a clean stroke. Luckily his common sense prevailed and stopped him. It was folly. He would never manage it.

Adamis saw Notaplo passing and gave him a curt nod. He could not risk sending him a mental message, not in the presence of the Five High Kings, since it might be intercepted. And if his Father were to do that, he would recognize him. The mental messages of each Golden had a unique voice, an unmistakable signature. He could not take the risk. Ariadne and Sormacus, who were at his side, had already warned him of this. As long as they were in the presence of the High Kings, they could not risk keeping in contact. Dear old Notaplo was so absorbed in himself that he never noticed.

Craning his neck, Adamis tried to catch his attention once again, but the one whose head turned was his own cousin Atasos. He lowered his head at once and the sudden fright left him breathless. If his cousin recognized him he was lost, and if he saw him he would certainly recognize him. He had been with him a short while ago during his exile at the Secret Temple of Eret, on the continent. A thousand thoughts passed through Adamis's mind, devious thoughts. There was a long moment of tension. Ariadne touched his hand, and he looked up very slowly. Her eyes told him the danger had passed. He saw the entourage of the First Ring taking their place before their High King. *I must be more careful*, he scolded himself.

The Master of Ceremonies spread his arms wide and called out:

"Welcome, all, to the Ceremony of Intellectual Enlightenment, a key festivity for the advancement of our civilization and which all the Houses proudly honor. Today intellect, brilliance, wisdom, and above all the eagerness of our civilization to excel and conquer new and unthinkable goals, receive their reward. This is the basis of our Power. This is what enables us to rule over the known world, since there is no other civilization so advanced and powerful." The members of the five delegations began to applaud in the Golden style by slapping their calves. Adamis smiled as he remembered how strange he had found Men's way of applauding.

The Master of Ceremonies went on: “As is traditional on this important date, and in the presence of their all-powerful majesties, the Five High Kings …” He turned and bowed deeply to the Golden rulers. They did not bat an eyelash, so the Priest turned again toward the delegations, who were watching him expectantly. “Every House will have the opportunity to present the most important technological advances they have achieved before their Majesties and before the representatives of the other Houses. Each achievement will be accepted or rejected according to the merits demonstrated and by approval or rejection according to their Majesties’ criteria.

“Let the First Erudite of the House of Aru, the House of Water, present the achievements of the illustrious House of the Fifth Ring!”

The ancient Erudite, who was nearing his nine-hundredth year, first greeted Prince Saxti and the entourage, then walked to the center of the chamber with slow steps, leaning on a blue staff encrusted with white ornamentation. He bowed deeply before the dais of the Five High Kings. The Monarchs watched him attentively.

“By your leave…” he said, and the inflexion of his mental message revealed the wise man’s advanced age.

“You may proceed,” said Edan, his High King.

“On this day which is so important for all of us, the Erudites in particular, and all the Golden in general, I will now show the most significant achievement of our venerable house.”

The High Kings nodded their permission for him to continue.

“It is an achievement linked to our sacred duty as Golden Erudites to find the key to the attainment of immortality. After hundreds of years of study and trial, we have achieved a very important advance in the technique of prolonging life through assisted freezing. We call this technology Frozen Hibernation. Allow me to demonstrate.” He signaled to two of his helpers. The two pupils brought a pod to the middle of the chamber and placed it on end. Its back was metallic and bluish. The front was of glass, revealing a man inside. He was completely frozen, covered with a layer of white frost.

“This specimen has been frozen for a hundred years. We froze him at the age of twenty. He would now be a hundred and twenty, and therefore being a man he ought to be dead. Yet he is still alive. And not only that, he has not

aged a single day. Let me show you what our wonderful technology allows us to do." He maneuvered several levers on the sides of the pod, and a blue flash issued from the cracks around the glass lid. There was a metallic click, and the Erudite waited patiently while the process of thawing came to an end. Everybody there was watching with great attention.

At last the pod opened. A white mist issued forth and settled heavily toward the floor. The two helpers brought out the man and held him firmly to keep him on his feet. He appeared to be asleep, but his color was now normal, he was no longer frozen. The Erudite placed a disc over his heart and used his Power. A golden light ran through the body of the slave from head to foot. Suddenly the sleeper opened his eyes wide in a grimace of horror. He took in a rapid breath of air, but swallowed too much, too soon, and started to cough and convulse. The two helpers held him firmly, keeping him on his feet.

"As all of you may observe," the Erudite went on, "he is alive and in perfect condition," One of the helpers seized the slave's hair and pulled his head back so that everyone could see his face. "This is the face of a man of twenty. He has not aged a single day."

The Master of Ceremonies turned to the Erudite. "Do you testify to the authenticity of this experiment, under sentence of death and dishonor for your house in case of perjury?"

"I do so testify," the Erudite answered with complete serenity and confidence.

"Very well. So it shall be written in the records of knowledge." With a sign he indicated to the Eyes-of-the-Gods that they should write down the achievement.

High King Gar bent forward. "How long will he live?" he asked. Such was his Power that the simple mental question burnt the mind of whoever received it. Adamis had to shake the thought from his mind.

"Our studies indicate that he will live an existence which is normal for his race. He will reach old age and die of natural causes. Freezing has no secondary effects on his organism."

"How many tests have you successfully performed in order to be sure of this one here today?" Gar asked.

“My Lord, more than a thousand that were not successful since the beginning of the experiments. But the last hundred of them have been successful. Everything has been documented in our source of knowledge.”

High King Gar gestured half-heartedly for the Erudite to proceed. Adamis, who was feeling profoundly troubled, took a deep breath. *More than a thousand men must have died or suffered indescribable horrors just for the discovery of this advance in our technology. They use people like animals for their experiments. That is something that cannot be permitted. It is cruel! Barbaric!* But for the Golden, men were no more than ants to do whatever they wanted with and to be trodden underfoot when they were no longer necessary.

“Is this technology applicable to our people?” Kaitze, High King of Air, asked suspiciously.

“I am glad that your Highness should ask me that question. Let me reply with a demonstration.” The Erudite gave another sign to his helpers. They took away the slave, who was now shaking from head to foot. A moment later they came back carrying another pod, identical to the previous one. Following the same procedure, the Erudite opened it and the helpers brought out the subject. But this time it was not a man who appeared but a Golden. There were several cries of surprise, followed by murmurs of disagreement. Several voices rose, protesting at such an outrage.

The Erudite attempted to calm the audience. “Let me show you,” he said. He hastened to put the disc on the Golden’s chest. He made use of his Power, and a golden light ran throughout the frozen body. Suddenly the sleeper opened his eyes, his face showing utter surprise. As he struggled to breathe normally and stop trembling with the aid of the two helpers, the Erudite explained: “Allow me to introduce you to my assistant Erreka. He has been frozen for a hundred years, and as you can see, he is alive. In a few moments he will be completely recovered.”

“You risk too much, Erudite. The life of a Golden is sacred,” said High King Gar.

Before the Erudite could respond, Edan, High King of Water, intervened.

“My Erudite knows the law perfectly well. He would not dare experiment with a Golden and put his life in danger if the technology were not safe.” The two High Kings were challenging one another in a battle of

wills. Gar had to pull back, since the assistant was alive and the law had not been broken. He made a sign of acceptance, but his eyes gleamed with resentment.

“My assistant knew the risk. He volunteered. Without risk there is no gain. That is the first law in the development of new technology.”

“Will we be able to use that technology?” said Lur, High King of Earth. “I have been informed that we cannot use it, that the Power will keep consuming our bodies.”

“Your information is correct, your Majesty… Our Power continues to feed on our organism even in the state of Frozen Hibernation, and hence even in that state we go on aging. But we have managed to make progress… considerable progress. Now we are capable of slowing down the pernicious effects of the Power during the process of hibernation, and in the process significantly reduce the deterioration of the body.”

“By how much?”

“We have managed to reduce the deterioration suffered by the body during hibernation by half.”

Kaitze, Lord of Air, intervened at this point. “In other words, you are saying that while we remain frozen, our bodies will age by half as much. If I freeze myself for a thousand years, will I have aged five hundred years when I wake up?”

“Yes, my lord, that is correct.”

Gar, Lord of Fire, said in a markedly contemptuous tone: “I do not see the use of it. Why would I want to freeze, only to wake up five hundred years older?”

“You would be waking up in a new millennium, my lord…”

“Nonsense. Unless the degree of aging is significantly reduced, it makes no sense.”

“But if we manage to reduce it to a tenth,” said Edan, Lord of Water, “then we would be practically immortal. We could live thousands and thousands of years hibernating between millennia. And remember, during that time we would continue our search until we found a way of avoiding aging during Frozen Hibernation, or even rejuvenate ourselves. That is what we are pursuing: reversing the process, being rejuvenated while we hibernate in a frozen state.”

There was a silence as the High Kings took in the implications of this. At last, Laino, the High King of Ether, gave his judgment.

“Very interesting, and with considerable possibilities. It has my approval.”

The comment caught Adamis’s attention. If his father gave his approval, it meant there was potential in the idea. *Interesting. I will have to speak to Notaplo about it.* The High Kings of Earth and Air too gave their approval. The only one who did not accept it was the High King of the House of Fire. The Master of Ceremonies gave a sign and the Eyes-of-the-Gods made a note.

He beckoned the next Erudite to continue with the Ceremony. “Let the First Erudite of the House of Idnem, House of Earth, present the achievements of the illustrious House of the Fourth Ring.”

The Erudite, also ancient, saluted his own people and then, with great solemnity, came forward to salute the Five High Kings.

“What my colleague of the House of Water has exposed is undoubtedly fascinating, and I could not agree more with his vision. Nevertheless, I do not share his method of reaching immortality, or to be more precise, his technology. We in the House of Earth have been working with a similar aim but with a far superior technology: Carbon Freezing. Let me demonstrate to you.” He signaled to several helpers, who brought in what appeared to be a great black tombstone. When they set it on the floor on a trestle, Adamis saw that it was really a rectangle of carbon with a slave frozen in the strange alloy. He appeared to have been trapped while attempting to flee.

“How long has he been like that?” asked Kaitze, High King of Air.

“A little over two hundred years, your Majesty. We have managed to keep him indefinitely alive with an influx of Power into the graphite. We have performed controlled tests with a Golden and the results have been wonderful.”

“And what advantage does this have over the technology of the House of Water?” asked Gar, the High King of Fire.

“Well, you see, your Majesty, we have managed to reduce the deterioration which the body of a Golden suffers during the stage of freezing in carbon to a third.”

“It is still a very high level of deterioration,” Gar protested. “Unacceptable.”

Lur, Lord of Earth, spoke in its defense. “It is lower than the technology of the House of Water,”

“And the disadvantages?” asked Edan, High King of Water. His eyes were half-closed, as if he already knew there was some problem.

The Erudite bent his head and glanced at his Lord, who nodded. “The main disadvantage of this technology is that it requires vast quantities of charcoal to create the alloy in which to freeze the subjects. We have tried to do it with regular coal, of which we have great reserves in the mines where the slaves work, but the results are not as satisfactory. So we are forced to burn the great forests to obtain charcoal.”

“I do not see the problem,” said Gar. “My House could help you with the fire.”

“Deforesting great territories has very adverse effects on nature,” said the High King of Ether. “It would mean killing flora and fauna and irreversibly changing a region’s ecosystem.”

“A small cost in order to reach immortality,” said Lur.

“I totally agree,” said Gar.

“I think we can establish that the House of Water and the House of Earth are competing to reach the same goal with two very similar technologies,” said Kaitze, Lord of Air.

The Five High Kings discussed the pros and cons of the technology. In the end the Houses of Fire, Air and Earth supported it and the Houses of Water and Ether rejected it. This was duly noted.

“Let the Erudite of the House of Aurez, House of Air, present the achievements of the House of the Third Ring,” said the Master of Ceremonies.

The Erudite addressed the Five High Kings: “The advance I wish to show you is one which will significantly help Erenal, our wonderful Eternal City. Our control of the element of Air and everything related to it has advanced so much that we are now able to control its most negative manifestations in nature.”

“What do you mean, Erudite?” asked High King Gar with interest.

“I mean storms, cyclones, hurricanes. They will no longer be a problem for us, for our city.”

“Interesting…” commented High King Lur. “Go on.”

“The House of Air has acquired the technology to control these adverse phenomena,” the Erudite said, while the whole chamber stared at him with great interest. Adamis knew that for all of them, one of the greatest problems had always been the sea and its storms. Living in a city on the ocean had that disadvantage. To protect themselves against the whims of Mother Nature, the Golden had designed two defenses. The first was the great wall in the shape of a waterfall that surrounded the city and protected them from less serious storms and rough seas. The second, in case of cyclones or tsunamis, was a giant sphere which rose in the case of imminent danger to envelop the entire city. It was generated by the Great Monolith. The problem was that raising that giant protective sphere required a massive amount of Power. At the same time, the barrier in the form of a waterfall consumed a great deal of Power in its turn. A cost which all the Houses had to pay by providing Power: the Power of thousands of Golden which went to keep up those protections.

The Erudite turned to his entourage. “The disc, please.” One of his helpers brought it to him, and the Erudite placed it on the floor. “Very well. Watch, my Lords.”

The image the disc projected was that of a great storm forming in a sky which was turning blacker every moment, above empty fields. Several Erudites were manipulating a white monolith. But that monolith was not a source of knowledge, it was something more. The storm began to grow in force, and strong winds began to lash the Erudites. The sky turned completely black, and the clouds burst. The winds reached hurricane force, and a tornado started to form above their heads. Adamis feared for the Erudites. If they did not leave, the tornado would bear them away.

“Pay attention now,” the Erudite commented.

The Erudites who were manipulating the monolith moved away. The artifact gave forth a series of white flashes, as if charging itself with Power. Suddenly there came a great discharge, and a beam of energy shot out of the monolith into the heart of the storm. The beam remained for a moment, as if gathering power, then there came an explosion of energy which spread

throughout the black clouds and dissolved them. The storm died out. Murmurs of approval filled the chamber.

High King Kaitze, Lord of Air, twined his fingers together. “We can kill storms, and soon we will be able to control the weather. We are no longer at the mercy of nature and her changes of mood. Our fear of storms, hurricanes and tsunamis is no more. We will control them and decide upon the weather we want to enjoy. More than that, on a day not too far off we will be able to decide when and where it will rain. We will be able to make good weather favor our crops, our fishing, cause everything to flourish at our convenience. We will be the lords of the climate.”

“But that is not yet a reality,” said Lur.

The Erudite intervened. “No, your Majesty, not yet. But we are not so far from achieving it. We will not need to raise the protective sphere which costs us all so much in Power.”

“That would be a marvelous thing,” Lur said.

Gar’s eyes were half-closed as he traced the advantages he might gain from this. “To bend nature to our will seems to me an achievement from which we can all benefit substantially,”

“And would it not be dangerous?” asked Edan, Lord of Water. “Manipulating the weather in that way does not seem very prudent to me,”

“Dangerous? In what sense, my Lord?”

“When my Erudites try freezing vast areas to obtain energy during the process of thawing them out, all nature dies. Plants, vegetation, animals, everything. It seems to me that destabilizing the climate in the interests of our convenience might have similar, and very adverse, effects.”

“And unpredictable ones too,” added Laino, Lord of Ether.

The Erudite meditated his answer. “It might be so, of course. We must not alter the existing climate in excess, as it could have unpredictable effects. True. Dangerous. We must be prudent and use this advance only in exceptional cases.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Gar, Lord of Fire. “We must use it whenever we wish!”

There followed a debate among the Five High Kings, who argued about the pros and cons of using such an advance. Finally they reached a division

of opinion, with a majority in favor: the High Kings of Air, Fire and Earth for it, those of Water and Ether against. The Eyes noted down the result. This worried Adamis. The yes side had won, so that the technology would be used and the repercussions could be terrible if it were used badly, or too much. What he was witnessing was worrying him more and more, and he was beginning to understand why Ariadne had told him more than once that they were being led toward a cataclysm.

“Let the First Erudite of the House of Aureb, House of Fire, present the achievements of the illustrious House of the Second Ring,” the Master of Ceremonies announced.

The Erudite in question bowed and came to stand in the center of the chamber.

“The advance I will proudly show you here today will change the future of our civilization. It is an achievement like no other, and it marks a before and after in the treatment of Power by the Golden. Let me show you.” He bent forward and placed a crystalline disc on the floor, then activated it and moved back. The disc projected a scene in the center of the chamber: a strong ship with the emblem of the House of the Second Ring, sailing on an icy sea.

“It is the North Sea, the icy sea,” the Erudite explained. The image moved on in time, and they saw the ship in front of an enormous iceberg. The ship came to a standstill, and several Golden crossed to the frozen surface in a small boat. They climbed to the top of the massive iceberg. The image followed them. The gigantic ice formation had broken off from a nearby glacier. The frozen beauty of the place and its extraordinary raw whiteness left Adamis open-mouthed with wonder. The Golden of the expedition drove a series of more than a hundred metallic rods deep into the frozen surface. The image flew over the surface of the iceberg, and they could now see that the rods formed a pentagon. Above each rod they placed a red metallic sphere the size of a head. To finish, they placed a crystalline sphere of considerable size in the center of the figure. They then left and went back to the ship.

Adamis was watching intently. *What are they seeking to do? I do not understand.*

“This was an experiment that was carried out with the intention of showing it here today, before your Majesties. What you are about to witness

is the most spectacular advance ever achieved in the acquisition of Power." He pointed to the image. The rods stuck in the iceberg began to heat, and a few moments later began to grow red hot, burning and melting the ice around them. Adamis realized they were being manipulated from the ship. The Erudites of the House of Fire were making them burn by using their power. The rods went on driving deeper into the iceberg until they reached its core. At that moment the Erudites caused the spheres at the end of each rod to explode simultaneously. There followed a devastating blast, with the power of an erupting volcano. A gigantic burst of flame rose to the sky in a fiery column which seemed to reach the sky itself. The iceberg evaporated, consumed by the intensity of the explosion.

Adamis shut his eyes tightly several times. He could not believe what had just happened. The iceberg had vanished in the great burst of flame. Where there had previously been a huge mass of ice was now only a crystal sphere, hovering above the sea with a golden radiance. *They have destroyed the whole iceberg, but why? What for?*

Edan, Lord of Water, was plainly upset by this show of military might. "We all know the destructive power of the House of Fire. That does not represent any advancement for our civilization."

Gar smiled sarcastically. "One should not jump to hasty conclusions. You might be wrong, my dear friend."

"In what way am I wrong?"

The Erudite of the House of Fire went on with his commentary. "The experiment is not a warlike one, my Lords. The key is in that sphere which is hovering above the sea." He indicated the image, which was now centered on the sphere. "Bring it over here," he told his helpers, and deactivated the image. The sphere was placed before the Five High Kings, who were staring at it with a mixture of confusion and interest.

"If you will be so good, your High Majesty of the House of Ether, could you feel the Power stored in the sphere? Your House finds it easier to perceive the Power than the others."

Laino did so. "This sphere contains a very significant amount of Power."

"How many discs, roughly, could be filled with the Power stored in it?"

"More than a thousand."

Amazed cries filled the chamber. The High Kings themselves were unable to hold back.

“A thousand discs?” cried Lur, “That is quite extraordinary!”

Gar rose proudly. “My Erudites have managed to make Fire turn the ice into water, and in the process of transformation pick up the energy liberated and make it into Power: a Power which can be stored in discs for our use and enjoyment. And the Power we use externally does not consume us, does not age us. This is indeed a key discovery, as it will change our way of life and allow us to age more slowly, because instead of having to use our own Power we will use that which we obtain from melting the ice of the northern seas. And that frozen world is gigantic, an endless continent. We can extract Power from it for thousands of years.” The Lord of Fire was beside himself with pride.

Murmurs of approval filled the chamber.

“It will have effects on nature,” Laino said thoughtfully. “Negative effects.”

“And what does that matter to us?” Gar countered. “Nature is weak, we are strong, we will dominate it. We almost do so now. Or have you not witnessed what the Houses of Earth and Air are capable of doing? They can bend Nature to their will, and soon, with all the Power we are going to obtain from melting the frozen northern continent, we will manipulate Nature at our whim and nothing will stop us. We will be true Gods!”

“That is precisely what worries me… the consequences of melting the ice continent,” Laino said. But his concern was buried beneath the cheers of everyone else. The cries took a long time to die down. The High Kings of Earth and Air gave their approval. The only one who did not was Laino. The Master of Ceremonies nodded, and the Eyes noted down the result.

“Let the First Erudite of the House of Eret, the House of Ether, present the achievements obtained by the illustrious House of the First Ring.”

Notaplo went up to the center of the chamber. Adamis looked closely at him. He seemed to be well; he looked just as he had when he himself had last seen him in person. *What advances will my good Erudite and friend present before the Five High Kings?* he wondered, with great interest.

The ancient Erudite greeted the High Kings respectfully, then turned to his entourage.

“Marcus, come forward, please.”

The slave stepped forward, leaving the anonymity that the entourage offered him. When he saw all eyes fixed on him, he hesitated. Adamis too fixed his eyes on the slave, and fear came up his throat with a sour taste. *No, Notaplo, do not show them, they will not understand!* he thought, and wanted to warn him against his mistake. But he saw his father Laino attentive to everything that was going on and knew that if he sent a mental warning to the Erudite, his father would pick it up and he, Adamis, would be discovered.

“Do not be afraid, come closer,” Notaplo told Marcus in a soothing voice.

The slave came forward with his head bent, gazing at the floor and almost trembling, until he was standing beside the Erudite.

“Your Majesties, this slave you see here with me has the key to immortality for our revered civilization.”

The announcement left everybody puzzled. The High Kings snorted in disbelief, and among the different delegations complete incredulity made itself manifest in loud cries.

“This slave is more than three hundred years old, so he ought to have died several times by now. Yet he is still alive and will live for another century. He has never been frozen, nor carbonized, nor has he been treated with any technology.”

High King Lur was not at all convinced. “Then how can he be alive? Slaves grow old and die quickly. If it were not for the fact that they breed like rabbits, they would not be much use to us,”

“This particular specimen is not a normal man, he is a hybrid.”

“Why do you embarrass us by showing us *that*?” said Kaitze. “The weaknesses and depraved tastes of some ought not to be shown in public.”

Murmurs and protests filled the hall again. Notaplo nodded several times, ignoring the protests until they gradually died out. Adamis knew what he was about to explain, and he was becoming more and more nervous on the good scholar’s behalf. The High Kings would never accept it.

“This hybrid is not just long-lived in himself, he has one special characteristic which is crucially important for us.” He turned to Marcus and put a hand on his shoulder. “Go ahead. Show them what you can do.”

Marcus cupped his hands, then closed his eyes. Concentrating, he created a small ball of fire which floated above his hands.

There were cries of surprise, which instantly turned to horror.

“What is this?” cried Gar.

“It cannot be!” thundered Lur.

“Who is that slave?” Edan demanded angrily.

Notaplo intervened at once to calm the general mood. ”The slave is an extraordinary anomaly. Marcus is a hybrid with Power.”

“What is this outrage?” yelled Gar. “How dare you bring this monster into our presence?”

“It is an abomination!” cried Lur. “It ought not to exist!”

“It must die!” Kaitze shouted. “It must be destroyed!”

Laino rose to his feet. “No one is to shed blood in this chamber! No one is to touch my Erudite or his specimen!” As he stood up, a black mist rose threateningly behind his body, like a formidable ghost ready to devour the soul of anyone who dared confront him.

Notaplo went on energetically, his voice full of conviction. “Your Majesties, I can assure you this is the only way to immortality. We do not need to remain frozen or carbonized, as the Houses of the Fourth and Fifth rings propose. Hybrids with Power are the key which will allow us to take a giant step forward. They possess the key component, which once it has been found and transferred to the Golden will make us truly immortal. In Marcus, the passage of time has been substantially delayed. But what is really crucial in him is that he possesses Power, as you have witnessed. This validates my theory: natural delaying of the ageing process can coexist with the Power. They are compatible, even though it does not happen among the Golden.”

“Enough of this! I will not listen to another word about this abomination,” Gar roared. A burst of flame issued from his body.

“Wait!” said Edan, “I want to know whether the Erudite has achieved what he says. That key you mention: have you managed to find it in your specimen?”

Notaplo shook his head slowly. “No, I have not found it yet. That is why I present my discoveries here today, in the hope that the other Erudites will

take on this study and that between us we can find the key. I am convinced that if the Five Houses work together, we will be able to succeed."

"In that case it is no more than a theory," said Lur. "My House will not support this madness."

"Nor mine," Kaitze said. "It is no more than an aberration,"

"We ought to kill both of them, Erudite and specimen alike, for such an outrage," said Gar.

"Leave, Erudite, for your own good," Edan told Notaplo. "You should not have presented such nonsense."

The reproaches turned into shouts. The chamber filled with savage criticisms, turning harsher with every moment. Notaplo was booed and forced to endure wounding comments with his head bowed. The insults began, and Adamis wanted to leap to his friend's defense. He made a gesture to do so, but Ariadne held him tightly by the arm. He turned to her, and she shook her head.

High King Laino intervened. "My Erudite has clearly explained his proposal to you. It is his vision for our future, and in my opinion it is correct. If you do not wish to take part in the study, that is your prerogative. Notaplo, you may leave."

Adamis understood his father's words: he believed in Notaplo, but could do nothing to help him. The other Houses would never accept it. Notaplo left amid base insults and humiliations. Adamis had the feeling, as in a dark premonition, that the Erudite had just signed his death sentence. He felt an acute stab of pain in his chest. He took a deep breath, trying to let it pass, but it did not disappear.

The Ceremony went on until the winning technology and the most advanced House had been decided on. The honor fell on the House of the Second Ring, that of the Lord of Fire. The entourage, headed by Asu, took the center of the room amid cheers. The entourages of the other Houses applauded respectfully, as tradition laid down. Adamis watched Asu in the center; he was exultant, prouder than ever, regarding everyone else with sneering hostility. High King Gar came down to greet them haughtily, with a broad smile of satisfaction. He received the trophy from the hands of the Master of Ceremonies and showed it defiantly to all,

Watching the King and the Prince of Fire together, now knowing the power of their new technology, Adamis felt as though an icy ghost had embraced him. And the presentiment was crystal clear: *We are going to die, all of us.*

Chapter 19

Kyra leapt off her horse and ran to hug Ikai. Both siblings melted into an embrace full of love and affection.

“I’m so happy to see you, Kyra!”

“You look awful, brother.”

“I’ve had a few complicated days,” he said with a smile. He leaned on his foot and gave a grimace of pain.

She looked down at his ankle. “What’s wrong with your foot?”

“It’s nothing serious, just a bad sprain.”

She smiled and shook her head.

“And why are you smiling now? It hurts terribly.”

“And it’ll hurt even more when it swells up.”

Ikai gave her a mock-glare. “Are you glad it hurts?”

She smiled from ear to ear. “No, I’m glad I have a horse.”

He nodded, smiling, then shook his head. “You’re impossible.”

“I know, and that’s why you love me so much, brother.”

“If my foot didn’t hurt so much and I wasn’t so tired I can’t even move my arms, I’d give you what for.”

“Ha! In your dreams!”

He laughed and hugged his sister again, filled with indescribable joy to be with her and find her safe and sound.

“It’s been such a long time… I was beginning to doubt whether we’d ever see each other again.”

“Yes, much too long. We knew it would take time, and that it’d be tough. You warned us. We all accepted the mission and its consequences. But I’m so happy to see you again!” She crushed him with another hug. He grunted with pain, but could not stop smiling.

“How did you find me?”

“I wasn’t looking for you, I was trying to find Maruk. I was following his trail with the disc. I got his message calling for help.”

Ikai nodded. “So did I.” He noticed there was something wrong with her hair. “And your hair? Why did you cut it?”

Kyra turned round to show him the burns in her neck and upper back.

His hand gently brushed the healing wound. “What happened?”

She sighed. “We’ve got an awful lot to tell each other.”

“Yes.” He scanned both sides of the road. “But not here. More Enforcers could appear.”

“All right. Can you ride with that ankle?”

“I think so.”

She mounted like an expert Amazon and offered him her hand. “Get on.”

He took his sister’s hand and leapt up, pushing himself up with his good foot.

“Where to?”

“I hid my weapons a little further on. Let’s pick them up. I’ll need them. And then let’s go get Maruk.”

“You know where he is?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes. In a camp at the end of this path.”

“Very well.”

They rode as fast as the horse could go. But the poor animal was exhausted, and the weight of two people was too much for it to keep up a lively pace. They had to stop several times so the poor beast could rest, otherwise he would have collapsed. Ikai too was very tired, and he fell asleep leaning on his sister. Kyra tucked him in and watched him as he slept. Her heart was filled with joy at being with her older brother again.

When they reached the Enforcers’ camp, the two of them approached very carefully and stealthily. They found the place deserted. Ikai read the footprints and concluded that they had left a day before.

“And now?” Kyra asked.

“We follow the trail. I hope Maruk makes it. He didn’t look good at all. He’d been tortured…”

“We’ll find him, and they’ll pay for it.”

He nodded. “Let’s rest a little before we go on.”

“Here?”

“Yes, they won’t come back. Wherever they’re going, they left in a hurry and they didn’t even wait for the Executors they sent after me.”

“Yes, that’s strange. Why such a hurry?”

Ikai shrugged. “They must have orders to deliver the prisoners. You know how literal-minded they are.”

“That’s right. They follow orders blindly.”

“There’s a stream right here. We’ll replenish our water skins.”

“Very well. I’ll do it.” She laughed. “I don’t want you to sprain the other ankle, clumsy.”

Ikai threw her the water-skin, laughing too.

They built up a fire. While they ate in the comfort of its warmth, they told each other everything that had happened during their time of separation. Kyra told him all she had lived through with the prairie tribe and Ikai did the same with the time he had spent among the people of the Highlands. Then he told her what had happened to him in that Boundary. When he had finished, Kyra told him about her encounter with the God in the underground temple.

“A God of the House of Fire?”

“That’s right. I have the burns to prove it.”

“That’s very strange. Do you think he was headed for here?”

“I’d say he was coming from here. Bear in mind that our paths crossed.”

He nodded. “Adamis told us the Golden never deigned to set foot in the Boundaries, that they considered it beneath them.”

“In general they don’t, but it’s the House of Fire, and that scum Asu might be plotting something.”

“That’s true. I wonder what it could be. Very strange things are going on in this place.”

“We’d better keep our eyes wide open in case anything should happen.”

“How’s your control of the Power? I haven’t managed to master it yet. I’m still having difficulties.”

“I can already use my own Power quite easily,” she said with a smile so wide and full of satisfaction that it lit up her face.

“Really?”

She nodded.

“But that’s fantastic!”

“I’m getting to master it, little by little. But there’s so much more to learn, I’m just scratching the surface, and I feel there’s a deep lake, and I have to dive into it and learn.”

Ikai blushed at the thought that his younger sister was better than he was himself. “You’re so much ahead of me. I’m a lot clumsier. I don’t know why, but I find it very hard to master.”

“That’s because you think too much about whatever you do. Stop thinking and let your feelings guide you, that’s what I do.”

“You might be right. I always question everything.”

She giggled. “Anyway, brother, take it easy, you can’t be better than me at everything.”

Ikai nodded, smiling, and the two of them shared a moment of joy which comforted their souls, lightening the heavy burdens they both carried.

With the arrival of dawn they set off, following the trail of the carts. Two days later they found the caravan of prisoners. From behind a rise in the road they saw their target entering an impressive city, with imposing walls decorated in red and orange to represent flames.

“The capital,” Kyra said.

“No doubt about that. And no doubt about who it belongs to, either.”

“The House of Fire. What a pity, we almost caught up with them. Half a day longer and they’d have been ours.”

“We’ll have to think how to get in there. It’s a big, impressive city.”

“You and your plans. We should go in through the gates and kill them all.”

“Well, that’s a great plan, little sis,” Ikai said sarcastically.

Kyra lowered her head and smiled.

It was midnight when Ikai floated up, slowly and carefully, trying not to lose his concentration, hugging the northern wall of the great walled city. He had used the Dark Spirit to keep himself hidden in the shadows and make himself invisible to the Guards. It took him quite a while, but he reached the battlement at last and crawled inside over the parapet. He glanced to left and right. There were no Guards. He was not surprised, as the two great gates of the city remained open and well-lit, as though inviting all to come in. But there was no-one to be seen in the streets. Only groups of Executors, patrolling the city.

Seeing there was no danger, he peered over the parapet and imitated a barn owl's hoot. Kyra answered from the foot of the wall. A moment later she had already floated up to the parapet at incredible speed. She stopped at the level of the battlements, floating calmly in the air.

"Come on, hide!" he said urgently.

She came forward over the parapet and dropped onto the battlements beside him.

He shook his head. "I'm amazed at how easy you make it look."

"It's just a question of keeping control."

"Well, you're not exactly one for calm and control!"

She shrugged and smiled. "Soon you'll find you can do it just as well as me. It should be even easier for you. You have a lot of self-control, and that's very handy when it comes to using the Power."

"Let's see if I can manage."

"Let's rescue Maruk, and then I'll teach you this and a couple other things I've learnt."

Ikai smiled at his sister. "Come on, then."

They found the magnificent capital brilliantly lit. It was the dead of night, but there was not a single street in the enormous city that was not lit by torches, braziers and large bonfires. The light of the flames danced in harmony with the sound of the night breeze. In front of the Regent's opulent palace rose the great Monolith of the Gods. Its base was surrounded by braziers, and in the middle of the main square there burnt a huge bonfire, guarded by twenty Executors.

Kyra pointed out a small square close to the wall. “How strange. Look at that square. Instead of a fountain, they’ve put a huge bonfire in the middle. What for? The weather’s warm, there’s no need for any heating.”

“Look further to the east,” Ikai said, pointing. “There are two more round plazas with two big bonfires. I don’t think they use them for warmth.”

“So?”

“I believe it’s for the House of Fire, like the way it is in the Eternal City, in their Ring.”

“Well, I don’t like it one little bit.”

“Nor do I. If we go down into these brightly-lit streets, they’ll see us.”

“So where do we go?” Kyra asked. The city’s huge. Where d’you think they’ve got Maruk held?”

“I suspect this city isn’t any different from the other Boundary Capitals. There’s the great Monolith of the Gods, behind the Regent’s palace, and the forbidden quadrants of the Enforcers should be behind it. And there’s the entrance to the…”

“The Dungeons of Oblivion!” Kyra interrupted. She understood where her brother’s thoughts had turned. “Do you think they might have him in there?”

“I can only think of that place. That or the Guard barracks.”

She nodded. “So what’s the plan?”

“To clear up some mysteries. Follow me. We’ll have to take the risk.”

The two siblings descended from the wall and made their way stealthily, at a crouch, through the deserted streets of the city. If they were discovered, there would be nowhere to hide; the fires lit up every street and every plaza. They reached the low wall around the Guard barracks. Ikai gestured to Kyra, and she understood. Using her Power she began to rise vertically, while Ikai looked uneasily in both directions. A patrol of Executors might appear at any moment. She put her head out over the wall, took a quick look at the inside and came down again.

“Not a soul to be seen,” she whispered.

“Sure?”

She nodded firmly.

“Wait for me here. There’s no point in both of us risking our lives. I’ll be back in a moment.”

The gates turned out to be open. He took a quick look inside, and seeing nobody, went in to investigate. Just as Kyra had said, the barracks were deserted. He went into the military building and found it abandoned. No one had lived there in a long time. The layer of dust on the furniture was more than two inches deep, it smelt rank and there was not a single footprint on the floor. He went down the stone stairs to the dungeons and found all the cells open. The prisoners had been taken away. He went back to Kyra.

“It’s empty.”

“Then that just leaves us the Dungeons of Oblivion…”

“Let’s go.”

They moved fast and in silence. A patrol of Executors appeared in a square they were about to cross. Ikai stopped and held Kyra back with his arm. They retraced their steps and hid in a doorway. The patrol went down another street without seeing them. If the alarm was sounded they would have a hundred Executors upon them before they could count as far as three, and it would be the end for them. They went on with the greatest care, stopping at every corner to check. They avoided two more patrols before they reached the wall which surrounded the forbidden quadrant of the Enforcers. Keeping close to the wall, they reached the corner. Ikai took a quick glance at the entrance. Half a dozen Executors were on watch duty there.

“Careful, they’re on duty,” he whispered.

She narrowed her eyes. “It must be for some reason…”

Ikai nodded. He noticed her shiver, something unusual in her, and he was concerned.

“Are you all right? Is anything wrong?”

She shook her head, but her face said otherwise.

“It’s… it’s the memory of what happened in there…”

“In the dungeons?”

“Yes, with Oskas, when he caught me and took me to the depths of that place of horror… What I saw… what he did to Urda…” She shivered again.

He tried to comfort her. “That was in our Boundary, not this one. Besides, Oskas is dead, you killed him. Don’t worry.”

She lowered her gaze and nodded.

Ikai was looking up at the high wall which surrounded the quadrant. “Ready?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

They shut their eyes, concentrated and used their Power. They rose together, close to the wall, and stopped when their eyes could see over it. They looked out at the gardens and buildings, calculating when the Executor patrol inside would disappear behind one of the buildings on their route. They waited patiently until there was no danger, both hovering in the air like two Gods. They sank gently into the gardens.

“Be very careful,” Ikai said.

Kyra nodded.

He studied the buildings. Three of them looked like huge warehouses. A spherical one, guarded by two executors, was the entrance to the Dungeons. They approached it secretly, keeping close to the warehouses, careful to make no sound, avoiding the patrols until they were near the two Guards.

“And now what?” Kyra asked.

“We have to finish them off quietly. Don’t let them sound the alarm.”

“That’s not really my strongest point,” she said with an apologetic grimace.

“I’ll deal with it.”

Ikai concentrated, summoned two Spirits of Anguish and sent them against the two Executors. Then he drew his sword and knife and followed them. In less than a heartbeat the spirits had the two Executors on the floor, and he finished them off. Kyra ran to help him hide the bodies inside. Once in the building they went down a flight of stone steps. They met two other Executors on watch duty. Ikai had no time to act, but Kyra hurled one against the other and then at the walls so brutally that all the bones in their bodies broke.

“Shhhhhh!” he whispered.

She spread her hands wide in mute apology.

“If we’re not careful, they’ll sound the alarm. And there are too many of them.”

“I know, but it’s just that with the Power, I do the first thing that comes into my mind… and that’s usually hurling them…”

“Well, hurl them silently.”

Kyra looked at him, wide-eyed. “I’ll try. But I can’t promise anything.”

They went down a long tunnel and into a chamber. When they arrived Ikai expected to find the sphere-cells with prisoners inside them, but what they found was not that, and it made him feel sick. His arms dropped to his sides and he was left in shock, speechless. The round chamber, whose ceiling and floor were of silver, was filled with narrow vertical pods. These were of metal, with crystal lids. Inside each pod was a naked human being submerged in some strange golden substance which covered them up to the neck. There were more than a hundred pods, arranged in concentric circles. From the top of each there issued a pipe that led up to the ceiling of the chamber, into which it disappeared.

Kyra too was shocked. “What… what’s that?”

Ikai came back to himself with a start and went over to look at the people in the pods. They seemed to be alive, although in some kind of sleep. A dozen metal rods had been inserted in their shoulders and thighs, as though they were being injected with something.

“I don’t know, but this looks very bad. Could it have something to do with turning them into Enforcers? You saw what they did to Urda. Is this what the pods were like?”

She swallowed hard and her gaze saddened. She shook her head. “No, the pods I saw were much bigger. And they were different, stronger and more metallic. Bear in mind that they had to hold an Executor, or even a Custodian. These are much smaller, and they look more fragile.”

“An experiment?” he suggested.

“It might be, but why so many? In all the experiments Notaplo showed me, his own and those of other Houses, the Gods only used a few slaves. Why experiment with so many? I don’t know… it doesn’t make much sense…”

“You’re right.”

Kyra walked between the pods, looking at the people inside. “Obviously it’s not to turn them into Enforcers. I wonder… why would they have them like this if it weren’t for that? What other evil can they have thought of?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think the Gods are the kind of people who’d waste resources. If they’ve got them like this it’s because they get something out of it.”

He banged one of the lids, trying to wake the person inside, but there was no way he could. He tried with several others, searching for Maruk.

“And that disc they all have attached to their foreheads?” Kyra asked.

Ikai stopped to look at a woman in one of the pods. She was very pale and extremely thin. He studied the crystalline disc on her forehead. It left a very unpleasant impression on him, but he chose to say nothing to his sister.

He gestured toward the way out. “Maruk isn’t here. Let’s keep looking.”

They left the chamber through a tunnel which led them to another, similar chamber. It too was full of pods. Maruk was not there either. They went into a third chamber and came face to face with a patrol of three Executors. Kyra and Ikai stopped dead, and it took the Executors a second to react. Kyra took advantage of their confusion and used her Power on impulse, hurling two of the Enforcers against the ceiling. Ikai drew his knife and sword and faced the third. He would not have time to use the disc. The two Executors hit the floor with brutal force in the same spot where they had been a moment before. They did not get back up. Ikai blocked the Executor’s spear with his knife and buried his sword in his neck with a lightning stroke. The Executor stepped back but did not fall. Ikai was readying himself to strike again when Kyra hurled his opponent against the ceiling.

He turned to his sister. “I already had him.”

She bowed her head and smiled, then brought her hand down. The Executor crashed on to the floor.

“I’ve learnt not just to lift them or hurl them around but also to aim them. I like that. They get such a shock they don’t even cry out.”

Ikai rolled his eyes.

“You should try it sometime, it’s most effective.”

He sighed. “I wish I could, but I don’t even get the chance to use the disc, much less use it like that… It takes me an eternity to concentrate so I can use it.”

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. You’ll learn.”

They went through all the chambers of the first level, a great deal more carefully. They did not find Maruk. What they did find was chamber after chamber filled with pods with people in that same comatose state, all of them with a disc attached to their foreheads.

“We’ll have to go down to the lower levels,” Ikai said resignedly.

“Come on, then. We’ll find him.”

They followed a long, narrow tunnel. After several twists and turns it opened into a triangular hall which they both recognized. The floor of the chamber was black, and a rectangular monolith twelve feet tall rose in the center. The strange hum that came from it told them it was active.

“Do you think you can operate it?” Ikai asked.

She shrugged. “We’ll have to try.”

Ikai made way for her. She stretched out her arm and placed her hand on the night-black surface of the artifact of the Gods. Nothing happened. She concentrated, trying to bring her Power to bear. Nothing.

“Use Adamis’s disc,” he suggested.

She did so, and on the third attempt the monolith let out a flash which lit up the whole chamber.

“I got it!” she cried in triumph.

“It looks as though you need the disc to activate objects of the Gods,” he said thoughtfully. “Your power isn’t enough.”

Kyra nodded. She was annoyed. “A pity….”

The floor lost its black color and turned crystalline. And as she had expected, they were able to see the floor below, as if ceiling and walls had turned into crystal.

“What’s happening?” Ikai asked restlessly.

“Take a good look. We’re going to see the whole lower level, all of it.”

“It’s a labyrinth,” he said in wonder. “With dozens of chambers connected by tunnels.”

“And they’re filled with pods. There must be thousands of them…”

The floor vibrated. “We’re going down, don’t worry.”

They began their descent to the lower levels. As they went down they discovered that the horror was repeated on each sub-level: dozens of chambers with hundreds of pods in them. They went down five sub-levels more before they stopped at the deepest.

“This place is a nightmare,” Ikai said.

Kyra, who had lived through all this before, snorted in disgust.

“I thought I’d never see that horror again. But I have an awful feeling that this is going to be even worse. They have thousands of our people in here, filling those pods, and it can’t be for anything good.”

“This explains why there wasn’t a single young person in the whole Boundary. They’ve got all of them here.”

“Let’s find Maruk and find out what’s going on here. That scum Asu is planning something horrible. I can feel it in my gut.”

The last floor was a single huge chamber. Before them more than a thousand pods were lined up in rows of ten. Between them was a long corridor, and in the middle a red monolith. They started toward it, eyes wide, looking between the pods, all their senses alert. Kyra walked with her throwing dagger in her right hand and Adamis’s disc in her left, Ikai, sword in his right hand and disc in his left, walked behind. The chamber was completely silent except for the strange hum which came from the pods. It was as though they were in a beehive.

When they were ten paces from the monolith, Maruk appeared suddenly in front of the artifact.

“Maruk!” Ikai cried.

With eyes filled with terror Maruk cried: “No!” and raised his hand to block their way.

Kyra and Ikai stopped.

A figure appeared from behind the monolith and laid a hand on Maruk’s shoulder. A golden hand.

Welcome. I was expecting you, the God said with a triumphant smile.

Kyra raised her hand to the back of her neck. It was the God who had attacked her in the temple.

“You!”

Yes, me. Now give me the weapons and the discs.

Kyra glanced at Ikai. Fight or surrender?

A thundering on the floor, like an earthquake, told them what was approaching. From among the pods a hundred executors appeared and surrounded them.

Surrender. I shall not repeat that.

Kyra and Ikai exchanged a glance, then let their weapons and discs fall to the floor.

Chapter 20

Adamis gazed up at the night sky. It was clear, with barely a light breeze in that section of the Second ring. His right leg hurt. *I wish I could say I am already used to something suddenly hurting, but the fact is, I cannot get used to it.* He rubbed his leg, although he knew it would be useless. These were certainly not the best conditions for a secret mission into the house of his hated enemy, but unfortunately he had to take the risk. If Sormacus's information was correct, something important was to happen that night, and he needed to find out what it was.

He used his Power, and a near-transparent mist issued from his body. He blended into it and passed over the high walls of the Prince of Fire's palace. The gardens were closely watched, with Custodians every ten paces, but in that form he was invisible to the eyes of the Enforcers. The gardens were decorated for the party in scarlet and gold. He passed by a fountain of fire surrounded by three incandescent rings, where servants were erecting golden awnings. At the far end, in another, more elevated garden, was a waterfall of lava which fell into a lake of magma. The image of the burning liquid falling with its golden radiance against the background of the night was beautiful. *Beautiful and dangerous. Do not forget where you are.*

He moved on toward the eastern wing of the great palace. He could now hear the guests arriving at the party. They came to the regal entrance, shaped like the mouth of a giant nightmare beast, in elaborate carriages that appeared to burn as they moved. Adamis knew they belonged to the nobles of the House of the Second Ring. The fame of Asu's parties was well-known. The term "magnificent" was one often used to describe them. On one occasion Adamis had been invited, and he could bear witness to the fact that he had never been to any other party to rival it in luxury, extravagance, lust and the squandering of wealth. Asu was a pompous imbecile who boasted of his position and power whenever he had the chance, in the most

ostentatious possible way. Unfortunately he was as dangerous and insane as he was vain, and that was bad for everybody.

He could now hear the sound of music coming from the hall. It was mingled with the insincere laughter of the guests as they were announced at the entrance and greeted acquaintances. The parties of the nobles and the powerful families of each house were spectacular, not just in their ostentation and waste but in their falsehood and gossip. And above all, they were the stage where the deeply dangerous game of politics was played out. Every one of those present had a goal in mind: to avoid losing their social position, and to seek to climb the House's pyramid of power. Political backstabbing while smiling in one another's faces was a constant. But this became truly lethal when it occurred between members of different Houses. The parties attended by members of the different Houses were fertile soil for espionage, intrigue and political maneuvering. *The fact is that I do not miss this whole false world of plots and counterplots.* From what Sormacus had been able to gather from his sources, a group from another House was to attend this party. Someone important, whom Asu seemed intent on pleasing. They had to find out why.

A few steps short of the wall, Adamis was forced to stop. The building was surrounded by Asu's personal guard. These were not Custodians but Warrior-Gods, and they were huge. There were around a hundred of them. What was worse, there were also several Lords on guard duty: powerful Lords who posed a serious problem, as they could pick up his Power. *The bloody paranoiac.* If he was found out he would be in serious trouble. Confronting them was not an option; they would sound the alarm and half the ring would appear in the blink of an eye. In addition, this was a spying mission, and if the alarm were raised he would not get the information he was searching for.

He examined the structure of the palace, searching for somewhere he could enter by without being detected. All of a sudden the walls began to burn, as if the palace had caught fire, with intense red-orange flames. Yet the Warrior-Gods remained at their posts, unflinching. Adamis snorted. *This is another of Asu's frivolities, to impress his guests.* Unfortunately the display made it more difficult for him to slip into the palace. *I hope my partner in crime is luckier,* he thought as he went around the building, looking for some other way in.

Ariadne went into Asu's palace through one of the many lesser entrances behind the grandiose building. The Commoners had to use that entrance, while the nobles and guests used the main one. She saluted the Warrior-Gods on duty by the great doors with a slight nod and went in, gazing humbly at the floor as she went. She had to be very careful, since as a Healer of the Fifth Ring, the House of Water, she was pretending to be a Healer of the House of Fire. Should she be discovered, she would be accused of espionage and would end up in prison, or dead. Most likely dead, bearing in mind the cruelty of the leaders of the House of Fire.

The Warrior-Gods did not react to her salute, they simply remained on watch, like imposing golden statues. In fact they did not worry her too much. The Warriors were not capable of picking up the essence of Power of a Golden, nor were they particularly intelligent in general, so that for the moment she was safe. But a powerful noble was a very different matter, and there would be many of them at that party.

She passed a mirror stretching from wall to wall and took a surreptitious glance at herself. She was wearing a low-necked red gown embroidered in black, with a simple necklace in the form of a plain silver chain from which a single pearl hung. She herself thought the outfit was beautiful. She barely recognized the image the mirror showed her, although compared to the gowns the nobility wore it was discreet and of very ordinary quality.

She went into a great hall where the guests were enjoying the best and tastiest food imaginable, accompanied by delicious elixirs, most of them alcoholic, in many colors and fruity flavors. She glanced quickly around and counted more than a hundred guests in that great over-decorated hall, most of them belonging to the House of Fire and the nobility. She felt suddenly nervous, and there was a queasiness in her stomach. She took three deep breaths, trying to restore her calm. There were several thousand Golden in the Second Ring who in all likelihood did not all know each other. There was no reason why they should recognize a healer of the commoners like her. In any case the nobles rarely took any notice of the commons, even those of their own House. But even so, she was nervous.

She went over to one of the tables where servants were busy preparing drinks with exquisite care, taking a good look at the hall and the guests. There was luxury everywhere around her, from the curtains of the finest silks to the gold-embroidered cushions, not forgetting the spectacular gowns of the ladies of the nobility. She must not allow herself to become dazzled by so much splendor, she was there to obtain information and so she would. She looked around for Asu, but could not see him. She had to find him.

“I do not think I have had the pleasure,” came the sudden mental message from someone close by. Ariadne turned slowly, her body tense. Beside her was a nobleman of the House of Fire, and his orange-crimson eyes were fixed on her.

“My Lord?” Ariadne said demurely, eying the Golden who had spoken to her. He was young and handsome, and radiated great power. He wore a luxurious red tunic with exquisite golden embroidery.

“I believe we have not been introduced. I would remember your beauty.”

Ariadne forced herself to smile engagingly. “You are right, my lord,” she said, lowering her gaze. “We have not been introduced.”

“We must right this wrong,” the nobleman said with a charming smile. “I am Lord Erre, first cousin of His Royal Highness Prince Asu.” He paused, waiting for Ariadne’s reaction to his high social position.

The Healer cursed her bad luck. At once she bowed elaborately. “It is an honor, my Lord.”

“The honor is all mine,” said he, watching her with growing interest. “A beauty out of the ordinary. I believe I am very much taken.” He took her hand gently.

She glanced aside. “You are making me blush, my Lord.” To her utter surprise she had indeed blushed.

“You have the hands of a Commoner,” he said.

Ariadne could not breathe for fear. If he should examine her Power, he would certainly find her out.

“What class do you belong to?”

“I am a Healer, my Lord.”

“Ah! An honorable profession. Giving away one’s own Power to heal and alleviate the pain of others. I have always admired that, it is deeply

selfless. Doing good by donating Power shortens life greatly. I must admit that I am not sure whether I could do it myself. It requires someone very special. Well done."

"You are most obliging," she said. "I am sure you too would do it, but you have far more important obligations. She hoped he would leave her alone. Of all the ladies at the party, why had he noticed her? It put her in danger; already a multitude of eyes was fixed on them. For a Noble of such high birth to show interest in a commoner was almost unthinkable. All she wanted was that he would leave her in peace so that she could lose herself among the guests and go on with her mission. But for some reason her wish was not to be granted.

"You have not told me your name…"

"Oh, forgive me, my name is…Ariela," she lied.

"Delighted to meet you, Ariadne. Would you like something to drink? A blue elixir, perhaps?" He waved to one of the servants.

"No thank you, Healers must not drink; we never know when we might be needed."

"Ah, that is true. How clumsy of me. I am not used to dealing with Healers."

Nor with Commoners, Ariadne wanted to say, but she held back.

"Everybody to the hemicycle! Come, you will not want to miss the show!" Asu's mental message reached her with such power that it burnt the mind. She half-closed her eyes and protected her mind.

"It would seem that the Prince demands his guests' attention," Lord Erre said, and offered her his arm. She took it (in the circumstances she could hardly refuse him) and went with him to a round hall in the form of an amphitheater. The upper floor, where they were, was a great round grandstand where everyone sought places to watch the event. Below, in the lower tier, was a great metallic cage on the floor of red marble with white veins. Guards surrounded the cage completely. In the middle was a very tall, massively-built slave. His upper body was protected by a coat of chain-mail, and his muscular arms and legs were protected by protective guards of steel. On his head was a helmet without a visor. The door of the cage opened, and another warrior went in. This one's skin was green, and he was

much thinner and wirier. He carried a long knife and a short axe and wore leather armor on his torso.

Ariadne was afraid of what was about to happen. “They are not going to make them fight, are they?”

Lord Erre looked at her in surprise. “Yes, it is one of the Lord of the House’s favorite entertainments. He calls them “slave fights”. And they are to the death.”

She could not hide her distaste. “To the death! I cannot believe it!”

“You are not in the habit of attending the parties of court members, do I gather?”

She swallowed. “No, I am nothing more than a simple healer. Commoners are not usually invited to the parties of the nobility …”

“True. Very true. It is rarely done in my House… But my dear cousin Asu loves to be magnanimous and invite a few Commoners to his extravagant parties.” He gave her an odd smile. “He loves to give cause for admiration.”

Ariadne could not tell whether he was laughing at the Prince-Heir of the House of Fire. Probably not. No, of course not, she must have misunderstood the comment.

“But why is he going to make them fight? They are slaves…”

“For the sake of the show. Look at all those spectators.” He waved at the guests, who were taking their places along the round balcony to watch the entertainment. They carried drinks in glasses of the finest crystal and were chatting animatedly with each other. “They are anxious to watch the slave fight. As soon as the first blood is shed, they will go mad with enthusiasm.”

Ariadne said nothing and lowered her gaze.

“Let the show begin!” Asu ordered, and went to stand in his place of honor. With him were two noblemen and several beautiful women: courtesans, no doubt. But what left Ariadne speechless was seeing who the guest of honor was. The information Sormacus had picked up was good. Next to the Prince of Fire stood none other than Aize, the Prince-Heir of the House of Air. The fact that Asu should have thrown a party was not unusual, but that he should do so in honor of the prince of a rival house certainly was: very much so. Did the two High Kings know that their heirs were enjoying themselves together? Ariadne doubted it very much.

Whatever the two royal princes were going to plot that evening would be deeply significant. They needed to find out what it was so as to be prepared.

The two warriors hurled themselves into the attack. Erre was right: as soon as the first blood was shed, the Nobles went mad, shouting and cheering their favorite. The fight was short and brutal. The giant struck several blows with sword and shield, which his opponent dodged by rolling on the floor. Ariadne thought the poor wretch had no chance against that mountain of muscle, but she was completely mistaken. The green-skinned man moved with the agility of a monkey, then in a totally unexpected move climbed onto the giant's back. Before the giant was able to dislodge him, his adversary was already cutting his throat. He collapsed like a felled tree.

The spectators were as surprised as Ariadne. They broke out in cheers and applause.

"Surprising, would you not say?" Asu asked the audience as he enjoyed the success of the fight among his guests.

This first fight was followed by half a dozen more, with opponents of different races, sizes and fighting skills. Ariadne endured as best she could this horrible spectacle of meaningless death. Warriors of the five Boundaries filed by, and even some of other races she did not know. Where had Asu found these men? The great continent was vast and mostly unexplored. Asu presumably had scouts looking for new slaves. And when at last the Prince of Fire put an end to the fights and Ariadne thought she could be free from of the unease in her stomach, something even more horrendous happened.

Their host strutted about with chin high and arms outspread, receiving the applause of his guests. "And now, my dear guests! The main course of our party!" he announced. He made a sign to his Custodians, who put the winners of the fights back into the cage. Ariadne thought he was going to make them fight among themselves all over again, but she was wrong. Asu had prepared something far more macabre and cruel. They placed the fighters against one side of the cage, then the Custodians went out.

Asu laughed. "Bring my little friends!"

"Little friends?" Ariadne asked Lord Erre.

"You will see what he means presently…"

Suddenly three mammoth beasts entered the opposite side of the cage, roaring furiously. They looked like lions, their heads at least, but their bodies were the size of large horses. And what left Ariadne petrified was seeing that they had wings, like those of a great eagle. What were those nightmare beasts?

“Oh no!” she cried.

“Do not worry, they cannot reach us up here, their wings do not allow them to fly. At least not yet. It is one of the “species” my cousin and his Erudites are developing in their laboratories.”

“Species?”

“Animal hybrids. I do not understand Asu’s fascination with creating those…”

“Monstrosities?”

“I was going to say freaks, but I suppose “monstrosities” is appropriate enough. It is something he has a passion for. The bigger and more lethal they are, the prouder he feels. They have carried out endless experiments, and from what I understand they are not the only ones. The word is that Lur, Prince of Earth and a personal friend of Asu’s, shares this passion, and they are both competing to see who can develop the most powerful species.”

Ariadne was unable to contain herself. “It is a crime against Mother Nature,” she said, and regretted it at once.

“It might be, I do not deny it. And the worst thing is that afterwards they set them loose on the continent to see how the other animals react to them and whether or not they can survive in the wild.”

“That is appalling.”

Erre shrugged. “Well, my cousin has these quirks.”

“Who will win? Slaves or beasts?” Asu asked his audience, who were already shouting and cheering in a frenzy. “Let us see.” He pointed his finger and sent a flash of fire against the floor behind the beasts. When they saw it they leapt forward. The warriors saw them coming at them and attacked in return. The cries of the slaves and the roars of the beasts filled the cage and rose through the amphitheater to its domed ceiling. Ariadne did not want to see the bloodbath. In a few moments it was over. The dismembered bodies of the slaves lay scattered across the marble, with

blood spattered all over the hall. Two of the beasts had perished, but a third one remained alive and triumphant.

“And the victory goes to my beasts!” Asu proclaimed exultantly. The audience was enjoying the show and applauding furiously.

Ariadne could not look. She was ready to throw up. She turned to Lord Erre, intending to get rid of the nobleman, at least for a moment, so that she could recover. “Now I would accept that drink,” she said,

“Oh, wonderful. I do believe it will do you good, after the “show””, he said with a smile, and went away toward the servants in the other room. Ariadne seized the chance to get a good look at her target. Asu was gesturing and boasting before his guest of honor, while the people applauded and cheered their host. Asu, full of false modesty, acknowledged the compliments of his guests. She felt her stomach turning again. This creature was pure falsehood and horror.

The two Princes left the amphitheater, commenting on the events of the show, and climbed the red marble stairs to the floor above. Ariadne wanted to follow them, but when she saw the line of soldiers posted along the walls, on the stairs as well as the upper floor, she changed her mind. Besides, it would look suspicious for a Commoner to go upstairs unaccompanied.

“I see there are other, more powerful, Lords who interest you more than I do,” Erre said behind her.

Ariadne turned to the nobleman. “No, it is not that at all,” she replied. She saw him smiling as he offered her the drink.

“It is natural enough. They are Princes, I am simply another nobleman.”

“And I a mere Commoner.”

There was another moment of silence. They stared at one another, each trying to read the other’s intentions.

“You might be of the Common caste, but let me assure you that noting in you is common. On the contrary, you are quite exceptional.”

His words left her without any defense. She blushed again, not knowing what to do. He smiled.

“Let us drink a toast,” he said, and raised his glass of blue elixir.

Ariadne raised her own.

“To us,” he said.

“To us,” she repeated, and they drank. As she did so she looked up toward the upper floor and saw Asu going into a studio together with his guest. She had to warn Adamis, and quickly, but the constant presence of the nobleman prevented her. She took two long sips. She had to improvise something.

“Be careful,” he warned her. “These exotic drinks can make you lose your head.”

And that gave her the excuse she needed. She took another sip, then took a deep breath. She waited a moment, then put her hand to her forehead and pretended her legs would not hold her up.

Erre held her by the waist with one hand. “Do you feel all right?” he asked in concern.

“Yes… you were right, I am not used to this. Would you bring me something to eat? It might make my stomach feel better…”

“Of course. I will be back at once.”

Ariadne straightened up as soon as he had gone, and seeing his back retreating, she held the pearl from her necklace between her fingers. She activated a small fraction of her Power, directed it at the pearl and whispered her message.

“They are going towards a room on the second floor. I cannot follow them, there are guards everywhere. Try to get there from outside.”

Her warning reached Adamis clearly. He was not surprised. It was becoming clearer to him all the time that the Children of Arutan were remarkably skilled at charming objects. He did not understand how they could do it, and he was glad, because their enemies would not be expecting anything of the kind. A disc could raise suspicion, while using the Power openly would be extremely dangerous in a hostile environment. But a pearl: who would suspect a pearl? He moved along the roof, among several Warrior-Gods. They did not notice the strange presence of the mist on the roof. He reached the edge and checked the height. The building was four stories high. The lowest level was where the shows were taking place. The guests were amusing themselves on the second floor, the third housed private studios and chambers, the fourth bedrooms and other suites. He let himself down from the roof to the fourth floor and watched. A light went on

in one of the middle rooms, with a great balcony in the shape of a half-moon. It was so wide it seemed to be a viewpoint over the gardens. *That is where it must be.* Carefully, he moved closer until he was immediately above it. There was nobody on the balcony; they were all inside.

He concentrated and sent a thread of his Power inside so as to find out who was there. He picked up the conversation that was taking place and drew back the thread so as not to be detected.

“Magnificent party, Asu,” Adamis heard, and knew it was Aize, the Prince of Air. He knew him well.

“I am glad that you are enjoying my little *soirée”* Asu said haughtily. Adamis felt his stomach burning at the thought of his enemy.

“I had heard that your parties were something worth witnessing, but I have only had the good fortune to be invited to those of your father, the High King.”

Asu smiled obliquely. “The game of politics… The High Kings are trying to keep up appearances by inviting the other Houses.”

“I have to say that their parties are not in the same league as this one…”

“My father and the other High Kings do not share my taste for spectacle and amusement. A pity, in my opinion. They are a bunch of stiff-necked old men, and it is their loss.”

“I was very surprised by this invitation, to me personally and not to my father.”

“So much so that you accepted it?” said Asu with a sneer.

“Yes: so intriguing that I just had to come and see what you are up to. Because you are up to something. You do not make a move behind your father’s back without a powerful reason.”

Asu smiled. A malicious smile. “Let us go out on to the balcony. We will be quieter there.”

The two Princes came out to breathe the warm night breeze. The Prince of Air was about to speak, but Asu raised his hand.

“Let us first check that we are alone.”

Aize nodded. They both closed their eyes and concentrated in order to use their Power.

Adamis grasped what was happening. He forced himself to close off his mind and hold back his own Power. But it would not be enough. *I am too close! I will be found out!* His nerves betrayed him, and he nearly slipped and fell. He held on as best he could to a projection on the roof. A painful cramp crept up his left arm. He cursed his bad luck silently, trying to rise above the pain.

Asu produced a wave of Power which expanded like a sphere in all directions. A moment later his guest did the same. Both waves were intended to pick up Power in the vicinity. Nothing would escape two royal Princes, from two of the most powerful families and strongest Houses, least of all the Power of a third and powerful Prince.

Both waves expanded, and in a moment they would reach Adamis. *I am lost,* he thought. And in that moment of panic he remembered Aruma's gifts. He had the sword at his belt, but he was not wearing the strange ring. He took it from his belt, and a moment before the waves reached him he put it on his finger. He closed his eyes tightly and awaited the contact he feared. The waves reached him and went on expanding without making contact, without detecting his presence. *Unbelievable! It works!* He recalled the name Aruma had given the ring: the Chameleon Ring. It certainly was that. He had blended in with his environment and was undetectable. He breathed out heavily with relief.

Asu smiled falsely. "We are alone. We can chat like a couple of good friends."

"Very well, let us talk."

"I suppose you will have heard the latest news from the continent…"

"I have heard the rumors, yes."

"Rumors? This is not a rumor, it is true. My spies have confirmed it."

"I find it hard to believe."

"Do not pretend, Aize. You know perfectly well it is true. First it was the Boundary of those incompetents of the House of the Fifth Ring. They lost their slaves in the revolt. That was something intolerable which ought to have been prevented by using the entire force of the Golden. Had it been in my hands I would have burnt them all, each and every one of those filthy slaves, and exterminated their race as an example. I assure you, that way this pestilent epidemic would have stopped at once. But nothing was done,

and now this evil has spread to two more Boundaries, like a contagious plague."

"The House of Water has lost its Boundary and fallen in disgrace. If it were not for its alliance with the House of Ether they would be finished."

"But the protection offered them by the House of Ether will not last long. Protecting the weak makes you weak yourself. They will not support them indefinitely. It is simply bad business. They would go down with them. They will let them sink, then seek out other alliances."

"True. Both Houses are weaker now, which favors us."

"And in addition this plague in the form of the revolution of the slaves keeps spreading to the other Boundaries, and will reach that of Ether, if it has not already done so …If their Boundary falls, both Houses will be in a very feeble position, and let me assure you that my own House will take advantage of the situation."

"And mine too."

"Well, yours not so much…"

"What do you mean?"

Asu gave a triumphant smile. "I mean, you have already lost your Boundary,"

"Those are lies!" Aize protested.

"No, they are not, and you know it. But we are not here to argue about that."

The Prince of Air relaxed. "We are not? Then why are we here?"

"To talk about an alliance."

Aize took a deep breath. "What are you planning?"

"I am simply looking for an ally for my future plans."

"Me?"

"Exactly."

"Your House, the House of Fire, is allied with the House of Earth. The House of Water with the House of Ether. My House, that of Air, stays in the center, impartial, maintaining the balance. And so it must be."

"That is what your Father the High King has taught you, and you, like a good little lap-dog Prince, repeat it."

“How dare you!” Aize cried in outrage.

“I dare because times are changing. Because the power is tilting in my favor. Three Houses have already lost their Boundaries, and that of Ether will soon do so as well. Only my own House will maintain its Boundary and thus become the most powerful.”

“Only the High Kings can seal alliances, you know that as well as I do. Nothing of what we might agree upon here tonight will have any value as long as we are not on the throne.”

Asu’s expression turned into one of sheer satisfaction. “Very well put.” He grinned from ear to ear.

Aize was not smiling. His eyes opened wide as he realized what Asu was really planning. “You are not thinking of going against the High Kings?”

“It is time to take the reins of our glorious civilization and lead it to a glorious future. But to do that we need strong leaders. The old kings are obsolete. They are weak, the slaves rebel and they do nothing, they are losing control. They are leading us into a future of war and destruction. The balance between the Houses is breaking down. Soon there will be bloodshed, as you know as well as I do. It is inevitable.”

“The High Kings have prevented it for over a thousand years.”

“Yes, but their time is coming to an end. Three weakened Houses, two strong ones: we are entering a state of great unbalance. Kings who are more concerned with prolonging their final days than with ruling, who do not decide, who do not take action… The war will start soon, believe me.”

“We can wait for them to abdicate in our favor.”

“Do you really want to take that risk? With your House weakened, without an alliance with any of the other four Houses? Your position is very awkward… I would say the most awkward of all, not to say desperate…”

The Prince of Air was about to deny the loss of his Boundary, but Asu cut him short.

“I am here to offer you my hand. Now, while you still have the choice. If you stay with your father and the Old Kings, your House will die, you yourself will die. I can assure you of that.” Asu’s threat was so convincing that even Adamis was certain that the House of Air would perish.

Aize was thoughtful for a long moment. “What are you offering me?”

Asu gave a victorious smile. “That is better. I am offering you an alliance. I can already count on the House of Earth. Prince Lurra and I are very good friends, as you know. If you join me, we will unite the three Houses, Fire, Earth and Air, and destroy the Houses of Water and Ether.”

“You are speaking of war…”

“It is inevitable. It will happen sooner or later. I am giving you the opportunity to choose the winning side.”

“And the High Kings?”

“This is an alliance between Princes, not Kings. We will deal with them in due course.”

“I cannot go against my father.”

“Think about it. It is you or him. If you do not join me now, you will have no kingdom to inherit.”

“How long do I have?”

“Until the full moon.”

“Very well, you will have my reply then.”

“Do not make a wrong decision…” Asu said threateningly.

“I will not,” Aize said, and left with a firm stride.

Adamis was deeply worried. He had witnessed a scene whose implications were deeply serious. He knew Asu was not in his right mind, but to make secret alliances with the Princes in order to go against the High Kings was something he could never have imagined. For a moment he considered the option of seizing Asu and killing him. But in all probability he would never manage to. Not in his present state. Not there, with Asu surrounded by his soldiers.

At that moment another figure came out on to the balcony. Adamis concentrated and watched. Who was Asu meeting with now?

“Did he take the bait?” asked the new arrival .

Asu’s eyes turned to his interlocutor, and he smiled. “He has, yes.”

“Will he accept?”

“Yes, he will accept. He has no choice.”

“When he does, let me be the one to deal with him.”

“Of course, my dear friend, the honor will be all yours.”

Chapter 21

Bring them to me, the God ordered.

The Executors pushed Kyra and Ikai along the corridor between the pods with their spears. As they stumbled along, he tried to make sense of what was happening. They were in the presence of a Golden! The Gods never set foot in the Boundaries. In that case what was this one doing there? He studied him for a moment as he approached them. This Golden was slender, and wore a rich dress-armor with a breastplate of silver and red scales. He carried a sword at his waist and an elegant cape which seemed to blaze. He was not a soldier, nor did he belong to the lower castes. He was a noble, dressed for war. He must be there carrying out a mission for his Lord. And if he was alone, without soldiers, then it must be a secret mission.

The Golden touched Maruk on the shoulder. There was a golden flash in the shape of a flame and Maruk, overcome with pain, bent over and fell to his knees.

“Leave him alone!” cried Kyra.

The God raised his hand and threatened her with a long golden finger.

Behave, slave. On your knees. Both of you.

She and Ikai knelt beside Maruk.

“I’m… I’m sorry…” he muttered, trembling. “I’ve… failed…”

Kyra took his hands in her own. “Of course you haven’t.”

“You’ve done all you could,” Ikai said. “Don’t torture yourself.”

Maruk bowed his head and shivered.

“We’ll get out of this,” Kyra assured him.

The Golden gave an arrogant guffaw.

You truly are resilient. But this is the end of the road for you.

“We’ll see about that,” Kyra said furiously.

My Lord will reward me beyond expectations. He has been looking for you for a long time, slave.

“Let me guess: you serve that swine Asu.”

The Golden stared at her wide-eyed, his thin eyebrows arched, his expression one of pure fury.

How do you dare speak like that of the Prince-Heir of the House of Fire? He snapped his fingers, and an orange-red bubble surrounded her.

She cried out. Her body temperature began to rise, and in a moment it had become unbearable, as if she were being boiled alive.

“Leave her, please, I beg you,” said Ikai.

She must learn her place. I will not tolerate lack of respect.

Kyra fell to the floor and began to scream.

“Enough, please. She’ll behave.”

The God kept up the torture a moment longer. Then he waved his hand and the bubble vanished.

Kyra breathed and searched her body for burns. But there was no trace of any.

“Are you all right?” Ikai asked her, full of concern.

She is. But the next time I will roast her alive like a chicken.

His Highness will not be happy, my Lord Beru, came another voice from behind the God.

A second God appeared beside the monolith. This one was not a noble, but wore the robe of an Erudite.

You are right, my good Erudite. Best not to make the Prince angry. He turned to Kyra, who was getting to her knees. *Another insult and it will be your brother who pays for it.*

She bit her lip and said nothing.

As for him, the God said, *and this one* – he indicated Maruk – *I can deliver them dead. Am I right, Erudite?*

That is correct, my Lord. The Five High Kings have ordered their capture and delivery, but they never specified in what state. Therefore they can be delivered dead.

And tortured.

Of course my Lord.

Very well. All is clear, then.

Kyra, Ikai and Maruk exchanged anguished looks.

Bring me their discs.

Two Executors handed them to their master. Beru examined them carefully. Then he used his power on them and closed his eyes, as if capturing the essence of Power in the discs.

Power of the House of Ether… of someone powerful… very powerful …

He brought out a third disc, Maruk's, and examined that in turn.

They are the same, all three of them. Who gave you these discs?

Nobody replied.

If I have to repeat the question, someone will suffer… a great deal.

It was Ikai who spoke. "Adamis gave them to us before he died."

Kyra glanced aside at her brother. Maruk bowed his head.

That traitor, eh? That makes sense. The imbecile was very powerful.

The three relaxed. The lie seemed to have worked.

Why did he give you three these discs? For what purpose?

Ikai realized that this Golden was no fool. Tricking him would be a complicated business. It would be better to tell as few lies as possible so as to appear as honest as possible.

"He gave them to us so they could help us free the Boundaries."

The Golden stood up straighter, considering the reply.

Erudite, can these three use the Power?

The Erudite approached them and took out a disc and a silver dagger.

Your right hand, he said to them.

The three exchanged glances, then reluctantly stretched out their hands. First he made a cut on Ikai's palm, so that the blood fell on to the disc. The crystal absorbed the blood, and countless tiny veins appeared carrying the blood to the golden pip in its center. When the blood reached it there came a golden flash that illuminated all of them.

This one can.

Then it was Maruk's turn. But there was no flash. The Erudite looked at the noble and shook his head. Finally it was Kyra's turn. There was a vivid flash.

She can.

The Erudite moved back to the Monolith.

That is curious, Beru commented. *The siblings can, but not this one. How did you use it without the ability?*

"With … a gauntlet from an Eye, modified."

The Golden laughed and clapped. *What resources these rats have! Amazing, the things they are capable of. If we are not careful, they will be capable of taking their own Rings off.* He laughed again. *I thought this one had no value. I was going to end his miserable existence.* He aimed a kick at Maruk. *And it turns out he has a good head on his shoulders.*

The Erudite nodded. *It is not at all easy to modify a gauntlet.*

You will live today. Tomorrow, we shall see, the God said, and laughed again.

"Thank you," Ikai said, hoping to pacify him.

You are a smart boy. He was staring at Ikai's scar. *I see by your face that you have been in trouble and that you have learnt from it. Tell me, how many Boundaries have you already freed?*

The question surprised him. He had thought that by this time all the Gods would know, but it seemed it was not so. And if they did not know… that meant the Houses were hiding the loss of the Boundaries from each other. This was interesting. It meant there was conflict between them, which was something they needed to happen. He considered his reply. He might lie, but he did not know how much this noble really knew. He decided not to take any risks.

"We've freed all the Boundaries except this one."

The expression on the Golden's face was first one of utter surprise, then of pure joy.

Unbelievable! These cockroaches seem to be worth studying!

They are, my Lord. Who would have thought it?

My Prince will shower me with riches for this piece of news. He fixed his red eyes on *Ikai. You would not dare to lie to me, would you? There is no*

need for me to tell you about the consequences of that.

"I haven't lied. This is the last Boundary. We've come to free it."

The God burst into gales of laughter. The more he laughed, the higher the temperature rose in the chamber.

And had I not been here you might even have done it. He controlled his laughter. *But it does not matter. Now that the other Boundaries have fallen and we still have control of our own, the House of Fire has become the strongest. Asu will be supreme.*

My Lord, the Erudite said suddenly.

Beru turned. The Erudite nodded to draw his attention to the end of the monolith.

It is time for the harvest.

A golden ring was climbing the surface of the monolith toward the upper end.

Excellent! He turned to the Executors. *Go back to the upper levels and get ready for harvest-time.*

The Executors obeyed at once. A dozen remained on the lower level. They disappeared for a moment, to reappear pushing huge metal carts with silver wheels. These resembled the carts used in the mines to carry ore. They placed one at the start of each line of pods and waited for their master's order.

Beru spread his arms wide and turned to the three of them. *You think yourselves very clever, you little rats. But the truth is that you would never in a million years be able to equal the intellect and creativity of our civilization. I will demonstrate this to you. And then you will understand how futile are your attempts at rebellion. You will never be free. You will always be our slaves, because we are immensely superior to your pathetic race, in every respect.*

The golden ring reached the end and shone with a blinding golden light which lit up the whole chamber.

It is time, my Lord, the Erudite said.

Go ahead. Let us collect.

The Erudite moved his hands over the monolith. One by one the pods lit up. Ikai looked at the one by his side. Suddenly the woman in it opened her

eyes wide. The disc with two silver circles on her forehead gave a loud metallic click and divided into two parts. The lower remained fixed, while the upper began to spin, flashing intermittently. One by one the discs of all those in the pods became activated, and the chamber filled with the sickly metallic clicking.

On the woman's face there appeared black veins. Ikai swallowed. Kyra was staring at another pod, where the same thing was happening. She moaned, horrified. After a few minutes the veins turned blacker still. The woman was now rigid, staring ahead, her eyes blank and her mouth twisted. The blackness spread throughout the veins in her face, then to her neck, then to the rest of her body. Ikai, fearing the worst, clenched his jaw.

At last the disc stopped with another loud click. Both circles of the disc had turned golden and shone intensely. He tried to make out whether the woman was still alive. Once again the metallic discs of the other pods filled the chamber. A terrible shudder passed through him, which he could not hide.

Beru noticed this. *Do not worry about them, slave, they are alive. They have serviced their Gods, and in a few days they will do so again.* He indicated the monolith, where the ring had gone down to the bottom and was touching the floor. His expression was one of pure satisfaction.

Collect them! he ordered his Enforcers.

The Executors carried out two actions with precise, rhythmic movements. First they operated a lever at the top of the pod which opened the crystal lid, revealing the head of the person inside, then withdrew the charged discs from their foreheads and deposited them on the left-hand side of the cart. After this they picked up empty discs from the right-hand side and placed them on the foreheads of the poor wretches, then shut the crystal lid. They repeated the process with each pod. When they had finished, they took the carts to Beru. The God examined them and smiled in satisfaction.

A new harvest. Excellent. My Lord Asu will be very pleased.

Kyra gave Ikai a questioning glance. What was going on? He read the question in his sister's eyes. Understanding all this and how it benefited Asu would be deeply important. They had to get information. He risked trying to find out.

"Will you let the slaves go now?"

Beru turned to him, obviously amused, and burst into loud guffaws once again. *Let them leave? Why would I do something so stupid?*

“So they can go back to their work? You’ll want them to fulfill the law of the Gods: produce or die.”

They are definitely not as bright as we give them credit for, these cockroaches, he commented to the Erudite. He picked up a crystalline disc from one of the carts, then gazed at the two golden circles which indicated it was charged. He smiled in satisfaction.

He nodded at the carts. *They are already producing for their Gods.*

Ikai was baffled by this. What were they producing?

I see from your expression of complete confusion that you have not the slightest idea what this disc contains.

Ikai shook his head.

How could they be expected to know, my Lord? the Erudite said. *They are nothing but stupid slaves, they would never understand the Golden technology. And that of the House of Fire is the most advanced. My Lord Moltus is eminent in the study of Power.*

Beru nodded emphatically. *Your master is an old lunatic, but seeing the incredible results he has obtained, I will pass no judgment on him. What is more, Asu is happy with his mad Erudite, and if the Prince is happy with him, that is what matters.*

He turned to Ikai and Kyra and showed them the disc.

That, you stupid rats, is what the slaves must produce. And it is a thousand times more valuable than all the gold, cereal, food or anything else you could create, harvest or produce. This is going to make us all-powerful and immortal: incontestable Gods.

Ikai could not imagine what he meant. However much he turned it over in his mind, he could not fathom what they could be getting from those poor souls, least of all how it might make them into all-powerful immortals. Kyra’s look told him she understood no more than he did.

Beru shook his head in amusement, enjoying his superior position in the face of his prisoners’ confusion. *They still do not understand. I will explain so that you can see how useless are your efforts to free the Boundaries. In the end, the only thing you will have managed to do is strengthen my Lord’s*

position. And with these discs he will be unstoppable. He will have power not only over the slaves, but overall the Golden. The Five Houses will soon be his.

"He will not manage to defeat the other houses," Kyra said firmly.

You are wrong, slave. Utterly wrong. This disc contains the vital energy of a slave. The Erudite Moltus has finally managed to develop the technology to extract it from your bodies and store it in discs so that we, the Golden, can make use of it.

Kyra's face changed suddenly. It went from confusion to horror. She turned pale.

"The Ceremony…of Vivification…" she stammered.

I see you are beginning to understand. Yes, it is similar to the Ceremony of Vivification, except that now we do not need to find a few selected chosen like you to extract life from. Now we have the capacity to extract the vital energy from any slave. Not only that, we can store it too – he showed them the disc – *and consume it.*

Brother and sister exchanged a look of horror.

The Claw, Beru commanded.

The Erudite opened a silver container. Inside was a golden bracelet with a claw-shaped clasp. He put it on Beru's right wrist. On the upper side of the bracelet a circle was engraved.

Come on, I want to taste this harvest, Beru said. He passed the disc to the Erudite, who nodded and fixed it into the engraved circle on the bracelet. The claw fastened onto Beru's wrist, and from its nails five needles pierced the Golden's flesh. Beru wrinkled his pointed nose, but said nothing. The disc shone and divided into two parts. The upper part began to spin as it shone. On the Golden's hand and arm black veins began to appear. After a few moments the black veins reached his neck, then rose to his face. Beru spread his arms wide.

Now I feel the essence of life in my body. He stretched out his left hand and created a fierce flame. *A good harvest indeed. It replenishes what I use, and so much more. Do you even understand what is happening, slaves? It replenishes the essence of life which the Power consumes in my body. Do you understand what this means? No, of course not. It means that I can use*

all the Power I want, all the Power I have, without fear of being consumed, without fear that it will consume my life and die.

Instantly Ikai understood the implications. He swallowed. The thing that stopped the Gods from using their Power, the fear of growing old, of being consumed, was now gone. As a result they could release all their destructive Power without fear of the consequences. And if that alone was catastrophic, the tragedy was now truly disastrous, because to be able to do this they needed slaves. It condemned Men to finish up in the pods until they died. He swallowed, and a shiver ran down his spine.

We will harvest all the slaves, not only those of this Boundary but all those who have fled. We will hunt them and put them in these pods so as to extract their essence of life and replenish our Power. We shall have unlimited Power, we will be immortal, all thanks to your petty lives, my little rodents.

Unfortunately they do not last very long, said the Erudite, who was examining the monolith.

How many have we lost during this harvest?

A little over a hundred. It could have been worse.

Very well, Beru said. *Look for replacements,*

There are barely any useful adults left in our Boundary, my Lord.

Then we will have to look elsewhere. He turned to Ikai. And our three rats know where to find more slaves. They will take us to them.

Kyra bowed her head. The repercussions of all they had discovered were so terrifying, so disheartening, that she could barely breathe. But come what may, they would never doom any human being to the harvest. Rather than that, they would die.

She raised her head, chin high. “Never!” she said.

Beru looked at her with amusement. *We shall see, my little rat, we shall see. Take them and lock them up. I shall enjoy playing with them. When I have finished, you will have told me everything I wish to now, in one way or another.*

Chapter 22

The trapdoor opened, and footsteps sounded on the stone stairs. Adamis raised himself in the cot and gave Ariadne a warning glance. The Healer withdrew until she had vanished into the shadows of that back chamber in the basement.

“I have some news,” Sormacus said suddenly.

Adamis shook his head. “You forgot to give the warning.”

“Oh… that’s true…such a hurry…”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“You do not look well… your lips are black…”

“Oh, well, a lot of tension, yes. I had to take a tisane to calm down. Well…several tisanes, actually.”

“I do not know what they are, but maybe those tisanes are not as good for you as you think.”

“They sooth me, which means a lot.”

Ariadne emerged from the shadows. “Well, your face and those black lips say that your body does not like them too much.”

“All right, I will bear it in mind.”

“So, tell us what is up?” Adamis said.

“Bad news.”

“Even worse than before?” Ariadne said, shaking her head.

“There is a great commotion in the First Ring.”

Adamis closed his eyes and snorted. “What is it about?”

Sormacus shook his head, “I could not find out. But it is serious. Several Houses have sent ‘Witness Delegations’.”

“Witness Delegations?” Ariadne repeated. “To the House of Ether? That is not usual at all.”

“That is why I have run back here to tell you.”

Adamis got to his feet with a grimace.

“Where is it?”

“At the Square of the Heroes, in front of the great statue.”

“I will go.”

“No you must not, Adamis,” Ariadne said. “I will go myself. A Commoner is less conspicuous.”

Sormacus put himself forward. “And a priest even less so,” he put in,

Adamis smiled gratefully.

“Nobody could wish for better partners in such turbulent times. You offer your lives when any danger arises, without hesitation. I am deeply grateful, and so I am sure are Aruma and your Wise People. But no, it is my domain, my House, and I must be the one who goes to find out what is happening.”

“It might be very risky,” said Ariadne. “They must not find you there. We need you.”

“If something serious is going on I must be there so as to understand why, and above all to see the High Kings’ reaction.”

Sormacus was shaking his head. “We are dispensable…”

“Nobody is dispensable,” Adamis assured him. “I used to think that way, when I was a self-absorbed prince, but Kyra showed me that every life is sacred, irreplaceable.”

Ariadne was not convinced. “‘Witness Delegations’ are only sent when there is something really serious which the Houses all need to witness, or to be more precise something which they wish to come out into the open.”

“That is exactly why I must go. Besides, I have to warn Notaplo of what we have found out. He has to know that Asu is plotting behind the backs of the Five High Kings to start a war and bring them down.”

“Do you believe he will tell the High King of Ether?” Ariadne asked. “I know he is your trusted Erudite, but the High King will want to know where

he got such serious information, and he might use very painful means to get hold of it."

"I trust Notaplo completely. He will not reveal the source, not even under torture. Anyway, I do not believe my father would go that far."

Ariadne pointed to his stomach, where the dagger had penetrated. "Are you sure of that?"

Adamis kept silent and pondered the situation. He could not stay still and do nothing while Asu carried out his plan. He had to warn the High Kings; only they could stop him. And of the five, the only one he could reach was his father. He also needed to see Notaplo and warn him, not only of the danger they all ran but of the danger the Erudite himself was already in. His appearance at the Celebration of Intellectual Enlightenment had earned him some very powerful enemies, among them Asu. Enemies who would not hesitate to sabotage his experiments, or something even worse.

"I have decided," he announced. "I will go and see what is going on and join Notaplo."

"All right," Ariadne said reluctantly. "But I will come with you, just in case."

Adamis nodded, grateful for the support. "Sormacus, can your contacts reach Notaplo? I do not want to risk communicating with him. My father might pick up the message."

The Priest gazed up at the ceiling and gave this some thought, "I think it might be done."

"Well, then, let us be on our way."

The journey, in the small cargo boat from the temple which served as their lair in the Fifth Ring to a secondary pier of the First Ring, was completed without notable incident, apart from the encounters with the Guards at each Ring. Sormacus, who had a safe-conduct to let him carry out the works of the Golden Dogma throughout the city, led the way. On this occasion the three of them were dressed as priests. Adamis felt somewhat uncomfortable in this disguise, but he had to admit that they aroused no suspicions. In addition, he could walk with his head down as was the custom among the Golden of faith, which his body was grateful for.

After they had docked, trying to pass as unobtrusively as possible, they approached the area of the tumult. It was roped off, and a crowd was

watching what was happening. The Witness Delegations of the four Houses were already there, demanding explanations from the representatives of the House of the First Ring. Adamis did not understand what was happening. Carefully they made their way through the curious throng until they could see what had created so much ado. When he finally saw it, he understood at once. Beside the giant foot of the granite statue was a dead body: the corpse of a Golden.

Golden blood has been shed! Unthinkable! The High Kings will not let this go unpunished. Now he understood the reason for the Delegations; they wanted to be present during the investigations. The horror and discontent all around was growing all the time, together with rumors spreading in whispers. He tried to find out what else was happening. He opened his mind and allowed the hundreds of conversations around him to enter it. A chaos of sentences and disconnected words reached him. And one caught his attention completely: Hila.

Puzzled, he fixed his eyes upon the corpse and made his way to the Custodians who guarded the area. He had to be sure. He saw the clothing, the pallor of the golden face, and he knew: the dead body belonged to the banished House of Hila, the House of the Necromancers. *It cannot be. They are forbidden to set foot in the Eternal City, under penalty of death. They would not risk a diplomatic incident.* It made no sense. And why in his own House? His father loathed the House of Hila. He would never have allowed one of its members to set foot in the First Ring.

“Nobody is to touch the corpse!” said the Lord of the Delegation of the House of Earth as he saw the Healers of the First Ring approaching the body.

“We must remove the body,” said Teslo, the Champion of the House of the First Ring. “It offends all those here.”

Recognizing Teslo, Adamis took a step back and hid among the crowd. His stomach gave him a stab of pain at the point where the Champion had stabbed him. *The mind gives one some bad moments.*

“We have the right to examine the body,” said the Lord representing the House of Air. “So says the Golden law.”

“No one will stop you from examining it,” Teslo told him, “but in a more private and appropriate environment.”

“How do we know that you will not tamper with the body?” the Lord of the House of Fire demanded. “Or that you will not hide any proof of what has happened here?”

“Nobody will do any such thing,” Teslo said defiantly. “And the mere insinuation is an insult to this House.”

“We all believe in the House of Ether’s impartiality and good faith,” said the Lord representing the House of Water.

“Speak for your own House,” said the Lord of the House of Fire. “We do not believe anything. This Golden belongs to a Banished House. Who of the House of the First Ring was he coming to meet under cover of night? What are the House of Hila and the House of Ether plotting? Could it be a forbidden alliance?”

“How dare you!” cried Teslo, and unsheathed his sword. At once a hundred Warrior-Gods came to stand behind him.

Panic began to spread among the spectators.

Adamis understood the game now. A very well-thought-out game. At a moment of maximum tension between the Houses, that corpse implied an argument between the House of Hila and that of his father, or what amounted to the same thing: high treason. The identity of the murderer was not important; the suspicion of intrigue would fall on his own house.

“Would you like us to come back with our Warriors?” the Lord of the House of Earth said threateningly.

“That will not be necessary,” someone said in an authoritative voice. Adamis recognized his cousin Atasos, who went to the body and looked at it for a moment. Then he turned to the delegations. “The House of Ether has nothing to do with this subject, nor with his death. High King Laino grants you permission to examine it. As for the curious, I must ask you to continue enjoying your day and refrain from spreading inappropriate rumors until what has happened has been explained.”

“That is better,” said the Lord of the House of Fire.

“Teslo, have them set up a closed military tent so they can inspect the body in private. Make sure it is a large one. The Delegations will want to verify everything.”

“At your command, my Lord.”

Atasos raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Everybody satisfied?” Nobody complained, and people began to leave.

While the slaves busied themselves putting up the great tent in the form of a marquee, Adamis watched the last Golden set off for the higher section of the city. Among them he recognized an old man who was walking slowly, head bent, leaning on a staff: it was Notaplo.

“I am going to speak to him,” he told Ariadne.

“It is too dangerous. In broad daylight you will be recognized!”

“Do not worry, I know this Ring and my old Erudite very well.”

Before she could protest again he had set off, holding himself as straight as he could, toward one of the streets which rose toward the upper part of the Ring.

Ariadne turned to Sormacus. “I hope they do not find him out. He is running too great a risk.”

“He is brave, and upright, something very rare among the nobles. What are we going to do?”

“We must warn the Ancients of this new event.”

“Who do you suspect of killing him?” Sormacus asked.

She shook her head. “His identity is the least of our problems. This will precipitate things. If the House of Ether has allied itself with the House of Hila, that is high treason. And if it is a trap, if they have dared set up a trap for the great House of Ether … either way, it leads me to believe it has lost power. It might not be in control of its own Boundary.”

Sormacus nodded. “I will find out.”

“Meanwhile I shall inform our people.”

“Be careful.”

“You too.”

Notaplo stopped in front of the garden of the Thousand White Roses. He inhaled their sweet fragrance, then left the path that led to the noble area

and went in to contemplate that wonder. He walked slowly, lost in delight, until he reached one of the huge fountains in the form of a radiant sun.

“You could never resist it, could you, old friend?”

The mental message took the Erudite by surprise. He looked everywhere without seeing who had spoken.

“Behind the fountain.”

Notaplo stepped forward, and as he rounded the fountain he saw Adamis. His expression of amazement and delight filled Adamis with joy.

“Your Highness!”

Notaplo fell clumsily on Adamis and hugged him.

“My Prince … how? What are you doing here?” Suddenly his face changed from joy to fear. He glanced in every direction.

“Do not worry, we are alone. I have made sure of it.” Adamis’ eyes lingered on the old man. He wore the same white robe and carried the same silver staff as always, and though his kind face had withered somewhat, his clear blue eyes, deep, filled with understanding and wisdom, shone with the same intensity. “I see you are well, my good friend.”

Notaplo nodded and let go of Adamis. He looked at him with misty eyes. “I cannot believe you are here. It does not seem real.”

“Believe it, my good old Erudite,” said Adamis, “it is me. Or what is left of me,” he added jokingly.

“How do you feel, my Lord?”

“I am fine, my old friend. Do not worry.” Adamis put his hand to his stomach, where he had been stabbed. “I have learnt to live with it.”

“To suffer with it, you mean.”

“It is still living, and I would never change it for the alternative.”

Notaplo shook his head bitterly. “You are strong, in spirit and in mind alike. So you have always been, ever since you were little. It saddens me so to see you like this.”

“We cannot change past decisions, you taught me that,” Adamis said with a smile. “I have no regrets. I did what I believed was fair, and I still think it was the right thing to do. I will take the consequences.”

“I am not one to judge you, my Prince, but I am with you.”

“I am no longer your Prince, or your Lord…”

“For me you will always be. And I am too old to change.” Notaplo smiled happily.

“What do you know about Kyra?” Adamis asked, anxious to hear good news. “Or about the others?”

“I do not have much news to give you, my lord. I know that the New-Shelter continues to grow and prosper. They have still not been discovered, although the High Kings keep combing the continent in search of them. The House of Water is desperate, they are calling upon too much Power in order to find them. If they do not succeed, it will be impossible for them to save face before the other Houses. Luckily my little invention works and is keeping them hidden.”

“Little invention?” cried Adamis incredulously. “You are a genius!”

“Oh, not at all. A lucky inspiration. When the Boundaries were created as prisons, I thought it was a regrettable idea. I have always wanted to turn them into something positive. And the occasion happened to arise.” The Erudite shrugged.

“If it were not for you they would have all been caught already, or something far worse. They owe you their lives. And do not think I do not know that you are risking your own life every time you help us. My father will kill you without hesitation if he finds out you are helping us. He will never forgive that betrayal, just as he did not forgive mine. I am deeply grateful, and I know I speak on behalf of all.”

The old man blushed. “It is nothing.”

“And what of Kyra? Have you heard anything?”

Notaplo shook his head. “I know nothing of my dear little shrew. Nor of her brother. But I have heard rumors…”

“What rumors?”

“Two more Boundaries have been liberated.”

Adamis clenched his fists in a gesture of triumph. “The two of them?”

“Yes, I believe they are Kyra and Ikai’s Boundaries.”

“Fantastic news!”

“They are only rumors, but by now nobody would dare talk about this unless there was some truth behind it.”

“Every night I am tempted to communicate with Kyra…”

“Do not do it!”

Adamis looked at him in surprise. Notaplo was not given to being startled.

“I do not know the reason – do not ask me – but your Father, the High King, is listening. I have seen him using his Power in the chamber of knowledge. He was trying to intercept messages from the continent.”

“That is not like him. Why would he be doing that? It consumes a great deal of Power… trying to pick up messages is wasting power in vain… my Father would not consume life without some powerful reason… and in the continent?”

“I do not know the reason. But he does it.”

“Thank you for the warning. My Father would recognize a message from me at once. His Power is enormous.”

Adamis put his golden hands on the old Erudite’s shoulders and looked him in the eye. “I am worried about your wellbeing.”

“I am perfectly well, my Prince.”

“You should not have spoken about your advances with the hybrids with power, before the Five Kings. They will not understand, and what is more, they will never either accept it or let you go on investigating. You have put your life at risk. I would never have allowed you to do it. It is too dangerous. Did my father not warn you not to make it public?”

“In life there are times when one has to make difficult decisions which will bring serious consequences. It is the only way of moving forward. Yes, your father warned me that making it public would create great controversy. He had his doubts about the appropriateness of talking about it, although I believe that deep down he approves. In the end he gave me his permission to do whatever I deemed best. And that is what I did. My power is running out, I am already very advanced in years. It is time for others to join my project. The path toward eternal life, toward the glory of our civilization, involves understanding why the hybrids with power do not age. I am fully convinced. That is the path we must follow, all of us, not the technologies they showed, several of which would lead us to destruction if we do not stop their development.”

“Yes, I too believe that. But trying to convince the Five High Kings to abandon their technologies and study what they abhor…”

“I know: they hate hybrids and despise Men. But that is our great mistake, because in them lies the key to reaching eternal life. And I no longer have much time at my disposal. I need other Erudites to join me in this. That is why I decided to take the risk and reveal it.”

“You are a wise man, and a good one. Too good…”

“Thank you, my Prince, you honor me.”

“You deserve that, and much more.”

“It is nothing.”

“Do you remember when I was little and I wanted to go exploring?”

“Of course I do. Your Father forbade it.”

“But I insisted, and kept on insisting. My father did not change his mind, but you on the other hand granted me my wish.”

Notaplo smiled. “You were a very persuasive child. I could not let you suffer locked up in a palace when you so wanted to explore the world.”

“And you built a secret portal for me, in the Chamber of Knowledge, outside my Father’s control, so I could go exploring.”

“Yes, those were times full of joy and hope.”

“The adventures we had! We even went to the great continent. I have never thanked you enough. Those were my happiest years.”

“I am glad this old man could make you happy. I have to admit that I too very much enjoyed our secret escapades.”

“You made me very happy, Notaplo. Very, very happy.”

The old man nodded with a smile, his gaze lost in memory. “Those were the days.”

“But I must warn you about something. In your goodness, you do not see evil in others. What they would be capable of doing to stop you reaching your goals, so that their truth may be the only one. For that reason they will destroy your truth, and you along with it. You must be careful. I do not want you walking around the city on your own without an escort. These are turbulent times, and soon things will begin to take on an even uglier face.”

“What do you mean?”

Adamis told him everything he had heard at Asu's party. Listening to him, the Erudite's face turned somber. When Adamis had finished, Notaplo shook his head as though unable to believe what he had heard.

"It is something deeply serious, unthinkable. That disturbed young man, the Prince of Fire, has always worried me, but I never suspected he would go so far in his delusions of grandeur. He has lost his head."

"So he may have, but it is happening."

"Do you wish me to tell your father? He ought to know… it is too important for us to hide this from him."

Adamis considered this for a moment. "Very well. You have a point. But he will ask you how you came by the information. What will you tell him? He must not know I am alive. You will have to lie to your King…"

Notaplo stroked his chin. "Do not worry, I will think of something. He will not know you are alive. I give you my word on that."

Adamis accepted this with a nod. "One more thing. After the appearance of today's dead body, I believe there has been foul play."

"Yes, I believe so too."

"Warn my Father the High King of this too. I have a feeling that things are going to get very difficult for all of us, very soon."

Notaplo nodded several times. "Very well, my lord. I will do so, rest assured."

"Thank you, my old friend." The two of them embraced, and Notaplo gave him a broad smile of affection.

"I hope to see you back at the palace someday, with your title and honors restored."

"I do not believe that will ever happen. But do not worry, your friendship is all I want to keep from my past life:"

"That you will always have."

They embraced again, and Notaplo left, smiling.

A short while later Adamis climbed onto the small boat where Ariadne was waiting.

“Everything all right?” she asked.

“Yes, everything is fine. I am more at ease now. I have warned Notaplo, and he knows what to do.”

“How did you know where to find him?”

“My good Erudite has fixed habits. He always takes the same route when he goes back to the Palace. He always stops at the same places: his favorite spots in the city. At this moment he will be contemplating the city from the Western Lookout. Then he will take the avenue to the Palace.”

Ariadne smiled. “Yes, that is a very pretty place. The views are spectacular.” She cast off with one of the oars.

From the lookout, Notaplo was gazing at the Eternal City shining in the night. That particular view enchanted him. How beautiful Erenal was, how beautiful were the great achievements of the Golden. He was so engrossed in the view of his beloved land that he did not notice the murderer behind him. He felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck, where the dagger entered his brain, and arms gripping him. His legs gave way and his sight blurred. *How wonderful my city is*, he thought, and died.

Chapter 23

Kyra tried to force the bars of the sphere-cell, without much hope. She had already ‘enjoyed’ the hospitality of one of those prisons of the Gods and knew it was impossible to force them. But she tried, anyway.

“By the Moon!” she cried, and her voice echoed in the round chamber with its silver floor and ceiling. There were twelve sphere-cells in a circle, filling the room. Only three of them were occupied.

“It’s useless,” Ikai said from another sphere. “Don’t strain yourself.”

“You know me, I had to try.”

He turned to his friend inside the sphere-cell to his right. “How are you, Maruk?”

“Better… seeing you has brought hope to my heart. I thought all was lost.”

Kyra tried to encourage him. “Hold on. We’ll win, you’ll see.”

“For a moment… I thought I was losing my mind…”

“Don’t worry,” Ikai told him. “You’re with us now, and nothing’s going to happen to you. We’ll get out of this one.”

Maruk took a deep breath, then let the air out in a long sigh.

“You’ve no idea how happy I am to see you.”

“We feel just the same,” said Kyra.

“It’s been very difficult. We didn’t know what was happening… the moment I arrived I tried to organize a resistance movement, without success. People kept disappearing… and didn’t come back. Nobody knew where they went or why. They were just taken. Little by little they took all the strong healthy ones. All that were left were the children and the elderly. They even took the Guard and the Proxies… When that happened I realized something truly horrible must be going on. I had to hide. The people were very frightened. In fact they were terrified…”

“I don’t blame them,” Ikai said.

“Now we know what’s happening,” said Kyra.

“And it’s worse than I’d imagined,” Maruk said, and his green eyes filled with tears.

“Yes,” Ikai said. “It’s like a horrible nightmare.”

“Which we’re all going to wake up from, brother. I swear that.”

He nodded. “Yes. We have to stop Asu, or else it’ll mean the end of both Men and Golden.”

Maruk looked at Ikai. “We need a plan.”

“That’s right, brother, think of something. One of your master plans would come in very handy right now.”

He smiled without humor. “Sure… no pressure…”

“For you, this is nothing. A couple of Gods, a hundred Executors and the three of us unarmed and locked up in sphere-cells. Child’s-play for you!”

Maruk could not help but laugh.

Ikai was looking worried. “Finding a way out of this is going to be so easy…”

Kyra glanced at her brother. “Well, that conceited know-it-all Beru’s forgotten one little detail…” He knew what she meant, and nodded.

“He’ll pay for his arrogance,” Kyra said, and her eyes sparkled.

They heard footsteps. Three Executors and an Eye-of-the-Gods appeared at the entrance. One of the Executors was carrying food on a tray and a jug of water. He offered the jug to Ikai.

“If you open the cells we’ll be able to eat and drink better,” Ikai said.

The Eye let out a jarring sound which distantly resembled laughter. On his hand he wore a gauntlet.

“Eat and drink. Quick. One by one.”

“They must be really afraid of us to be so careful,” Kyra said.

The Eye stood tall. “We serve the Gods. We fear nobody and nothing.”

“Sure, that’s why they’ve fastened a golden pip to your forehead. But don’t worry, I’ll help you take it out.”

The Eye laughed again. “Eat and be quiet, slave.”

But Kyra did not eat. Her eyes were closed. The Eye repeated the order, but she did not respond.

“Do as I say, or else I will make you suffer,” the Eye said. He took out a disc with a golden pip which he held with his gauntlet.

“You see, Enforcer,” Kyra said, “your great master forgot one little detail.”

“What detail?”

“This,” she said, and used her Power. She hurled the Eye against the other three Executors with brutal force. The four crashed on to the floor and stayed there. “I don’t need the disc to use the Power. I can use my own Power. Isn’t that a surprise?” And she hurled the Eye against the Executors one more time as they were trying to get up. She struck each of them with the Eye again and again, until none of them rose.

“Done,” she said.

Ikai was still in a state of shock at his sister’s brutality. “A bit savage…”

“If you want to get out of here alive, we can’t pussy-foot around.”

“She’s right,” Maruk said

“Right… and now how do we open these cells? I don’t think you can do it with your Power.”

“Hmm, no. But I have an idea.” She concentrated and dragged the Eye towards her. All the bones in his body were broken. In his sash she found the key to the cells and held it up triumphantly to her brother.

He had to concede victory to his sister. They opened the cells and took the Executors’ weapons. Kyra searched for the Eye’s disc and found it in a corner. It was not damaged, and she gave it to Ikai.

“See if you can use it.”

“Do you think I can?”

“I don’t see why not. That pip has the Power of a God, most likely one from the House of Fire. If we’ve been able to use Adamis’s disc, we should be able to use the Power in any other disc…”

“Sounds reasonable. I’ll try.”

He concentrated. To his surprise, after a moment he felt the tingling sensation which told him he had interacted with the Power. The disc

flashed, showing that it had been activated.

“You see?”

“Just lately you’ve been right about a lot of things, little sis.”

“Maybe I’m growing up…”

The three exchanged doubtful looks.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” she added.

Ikai and Maruk smiled.

Ikai pointed to the way out of the chamber. “We have to escape from here, and it’s not going to be easy. We’re at the deepest level of the dungeons. There are a hundred Executors between us and the surface.”

“And two Gods…” added Maruk in a strained voice.

“But they’re not all on this level,” Kyra pointed out. “That smug Beru sent them up to the higher levels to collect the discs. Besides, a while ago we had the same problem, and then we were locked up and unarmed. Now we’re out of the cells and armed. This is getting better by the moment.”

“That’s true,” Maruk said, more cheerfully.

“Good,” Ikai said. “Now we have to get out without being killed. Which looks like being quite a complicated business.”

“Think, brother, think. We have skills the Power allows us. Let’s use them.”

“If we use them in the open, we’ll lose. There are too many of them. And that’s not counting him… remember he’s very powerful, no less than a Noble of the House of Fire. We can’t fight a God, that’s crazy. And this one least of all. He’d kill us without a second thought.”

“If it’s not in the open,” Maruk said, “we can try a bit of trickery and escape that way.”

Ikai and Kyra gave him all their attention.

“What have you got in mind?” Ikai asked him.

“Well, the central chamber has two corridors crossing it. One goes north-south, the other one east-west. The monolith is in the center.”

“Go on,” Kyra prompted him.

There was a triumphant gleam in Maruk’s eyes. “If we manage to get out through one of the passages without being seen, we might escape…”

“Hmm… let me think,” Ikai said. “I’ve got an idea coming.”

A little later a thick mist which rose three hand-spans from the floor began to spread through the whole level. It gradually spread until it covered all the chambers. The Executors began to gather in the great central chamber, with the monolith and the pods. They did not understand what was going on. By now the mist reached their knees. They watched it through their helmets of horror, not knowing what to do.

One of the Eyes-of-the-Gods came to check on the pods in case this strange phenomenon might be the result of some massive leak in them. He was examining a pod by the monolith, checking what it said in his golden book about the normal working parameters of the pods. Two hands closed on his ankles like pincers. The Eye looked down, but all he could see was the low cloud of white mist that covered the floor.

“What…?” he shrieked in his metallic voice.

He felt a strong pull, lost his balance and fell on his back, so that he was covered by the mist. There was a grunt, and he vanished. Two Executors saw this and hurried to the spot, but could not find him. They began to prod the mist with their spears in search of him, but by now the mist was so thick it was like snow. They did not find anything. The Eye had vanished.

“Where is he?” one of the Executors asked another in his cavernous voice.

Before the other could answer, both of them fell backwards with a dull sound and disappeared into the mist. They did not get up again. A third Executor came from the pods and saw what was happening. He was about to sound the alarm when a Spirit of Agony emerged from the mist in front of him.

“What…?”

The spirit threw itself on the Executor and consumed him. Two more Executors appeared. They were going to help their comrade in his struggle with the spirit, but a brutal force hit their feet and knocked them on to their faces. Before they could get up again another force propelled them, with immense strength, against the walls. There followed a loud crash. The

Executors never got up again, and nothing was seen of what had happened. Another Executor appeared on the other side of the chamber. The Spirit of Agony dived into the mist. A moment later it surfaced in front of the Executor. There was a struggle, and both of them died, vanishing into the mist.

A somber silence filled the chamber. The poor wretches in the pods, in their comatose state, were mute witnesses to these strange events. The mist spread to fill every corner, and one by one the Enforcers fell and vanished into it.

Suddenly a voice thundered from the end of the tunnel, at the northern entrance: *What is happening here? Enforcers, to me!* But there were no Enforcers left on that level. *Enforcers, to me!* the voice repeated. But the Enforcers could not respond. The God came down the corridor to the monolith. He saw the mist and activated the golden artifact. *This is not from the pods. This is…Power!*

A new Spirit of Agony appeared before the God. It fell on him, seeking to devour his golden face. The God took a step back and cried out in surprise. He tried to defend himself, covering his face with his hands. A moment later two flares issued from his golden palms. The Spirit of Agony roared in pain, but kept coming. It reached the face of the Golden. And now it was the God who cried out, a cry of horror and agony. The flames consumed the spirit, destroying it. The Golden managed to recover from the attack and looked around, trying to see his attacker. But all he could see was the low mist, amid a deadly silence.

Show yourself! he demanded. *How dare you attack a Golden of the House of Fire in his own domains?*

From the mist at the end of the corridor, Kyra emerged. She rose as if coming back to life from the dead and faced the God.

You!

“Hello, Erudite.”

It is impossible! How did you escape?

“I’m very smart.”

You will pay for this! The Erudite spread out the palms of both hands and attacked. From his hands came two flares which went straight for Kyra, who did not move. She closed her eyes and used her Power. A translucent

sphere enveloped her. The flames reached it and crashed against the protection.

How can you use the Power? You have no disc!

“Odd, isn’t it?”

I would love to study you, the Erudite said with a gleam in his eyes, while at the same time he kept the flames attacking her protective sphere. *Give yourself up and I will pardon your life in exchange for studying you.*

She smiled. “I’ve already been studied. And it turns out I don’t need your damn discs. I have my Own Power, and I can use it as I wish.” She strengthened the sphere so that it would not succumb to the flames.

That is not possible!

“It certainly is, my little Erudite. So I’ll make you a proposition. Surrender, and I won’t kill you.”

Surrender to a slave? I am a God!

“Well, you’re an Erudite, which in the ranking order among Gods doesn’t put you very high. A little above the Healers, if I’m not mistaken…”

I will roast you for this!

Kyra shook her head. “Last chance. Surrender.”

The Erudite sent a fiery arrow at great speed, which buried itself in her sphere. The tip pierced it, but it remained stuck there without touching her body.

“I didn’t like that. And you can’t say I didn’t give you a chance.” She focused on the Golden’s aura.

No! he screamed when he realized what was happening.

Kyra managed to secure her aim and used her Power as quickly as she could, before the Golden had time to react. The Erudite was hurled up against the monolith behind him and crashed against it. By now the mist reached his chest. From the corner of his mouth, dark blood dribbled.

How…how… he muttered, but he could not finish the sentence and moaned in pain instead.

Kyra reached out her arm and closed her hand, not completely, but as if she were holding something. The Erudite felt a force clutching his neck.

She tightened her hand a bit more. The Golden raised his hands to his neck. He could not breathe. She tightened her grip a little more.

No! He coughed. *No… please…*

Kyra looked hard at the Golden for a moment. She had him. If she tightened her grip just a little more she would strangle him. If she used even more strength, she would break his neck. He was at her complete mercy. The rage in her stomach told her to kill him. He was a Golden, he had condemned thousands of people to the pods. He squeezed them until they were dead. He was an abominable creature. He deserved death. She was about to carry out the death sentence, but something inside her told her to stop. And think. Think of all those people. *I need him alive so I can rescue as many as possible. Killing him wouldn't get us anywhere. If he lives he can help me save those poor souls.* She made her decision. She tightened her grip just a little, gently, and the Erudite fainted for lack of air. She dropped him, and he disappeared into the mist.

Truly fascinating, a voice said in the form of a mental message.

She started. She felt a terrible chill. It was Beru. She turned, but could not see the God because of the pods. He was entering the chamber through one of the adjacent ones to the north. He made his way down the corridor as far as the monolith, turned east and faced her fearlessly.

I never thought I would see the day when a slave defeated a God. I must say, it is rather remarkable. Even though he is a minor God, a commoner, it has still never happened before. And If I should tell anyone, nobody would believe me. Not in Alantres, our eternal city.

"Give yourself up and free the prisoners, and then I won't kill you," Kyra said firmly. With utter conviction.

Beru gave a loud guffaw. *The fact that you have defeated an Erudite does not mean that you would be able to defeat a Noble. I am a hundred times more powerful than him. I belong to an ancient family; do not make the mistake of defying me. I cannot be defeated by a slave.*

"That's what he thought."

The Golden smiled and shook his head. *I too would not have thought it possible. The surprises we stumble upon in our existence! Not for nothing is my Lord Asu so interested in you. I have no doubt that he perceived*

something different in you, and that is why he wishes to capture you so intently.

“One day I’ll pay that heartless creature back.”

Beware of what you say, slave. Or I might have to deliver you with half your body charred.

“I’d like to see you try.”

I shall not tell you twice, slave. Kneel before me or you will suffer.

“Now look, you arrogant Golden, I have a mission to carry out and you’re interfering. I’ve come to free all these poor souls and lead them to freedom, and that’s just what I’m going to do. If you stop me it’ll all be over for you.”

Beru began to laugh uncontrollably. Kyra seized the moment to fix on his aura. Beru stopped laughing at once and raised a protective sphere of lava and fire so quickly that she was unable to use her Power.

Too quick for you, slave? I am a Noble of the House of Fire! I can sense your clumsy attempts before you carry them out. I can defend myself before you even find your own Power to attack me with. And I can attack with the speed and strength of a comet. He reached out with his arm and with a twist of his wrist created a missile in the shape of a great ball of fire which flew towards her.

The ball of fire crossed the space which separated them and impacted against her protective sphere. It burst on contact, spreading fire all around. The explosion left her stunned and sore, but the sphere held, although it would not for much longer.

That sphere of yours is not strong enough to protect you from my Power. You cannot fight me, you stupid slave.

A Spirit of Agony rose out of the mist and attacked him. It encountered the Golden’s sphere and began to attack it in its attempt to reach the enemy’s face.

A Spirit of Ether? he exclaimed in astonishment. He turned to Kyra, who was still recovering from the impact of the explosion. *You cannot have done this*, he said, and turned around in search of the new threat. But all he could see was fog and the pods. *Where is your brother? You cursed slippery rats! Now you will see!* He bent over, ignoring the Spirit, which kept attacking his sphere of lava and fire. He put both hands on the floor through the

protective sphere and murmured some words. When he had finished the whole floor around him began to burn, consuming the fog. He murmured again for a long moment, then withdrew his hands. The fire around him began to spread throughout the chamber, consuming the mist of ether. *I hope you enjoy my River of Fire,* he said with real pleasure.

The flames moved on among the pods, flooding the chamber like a river: a river of fire. Ikai was lying on his face at the end of the south corridor, hidden in the fog, which covered him completely. The river of fire advanced toward him. Seeing there was no escape, he used the disc again and covered himself with a sphere of ether. The river reached him, devouring the mist which hid him. He got to his feet.

Delighted with himself, Beru turned to glare at Ikai. *There is the other rat! I knew you would have to come out!*

Without wasting time, Ikai attacked. He sent an ethereal arrow at Beru's sphere. The missile stuck in the sphere but did not manage to pierce it.

Ha ha ha! Do you really think you can defeat me with that?

As he laughed, Maruk – who like Ikai had been hidden in the mist, but at the eastern end of the corridor – got to his feet an instant before the river of fire reached him and leapt up on to one of the pods. He climbed to the top and prayed to Oxatsi that the flames of the river would not reach him.

Kyra recovered. She concentrated and attacked, creating a prism of pure Ether, and sent it against Beru. When it made contact with his sphere the prism burst in an explosion of pure energy which shook the God and weakened his sphere.

How dare you!

Ikai created a new Spirit and sent it to attack Beru. Kyra prepared another prism of energy. Maruk, seeing the river of fire disappearing, leapt off the pod, seized the spears of the three charred Executors and readied himself. Beru cried out in rage and strengthened his battered protective sphere.

Kyra sent her prism of Ether and Ikai his arrow of ether, while Maruk launched one of the Executors' spears with all his strength. Beru received the three impacts and yelled, beside himself with fury.

I will roast you! You cursed slaves! The Golden looked at Kyra to the east, Ikai to the south and Maruk to the west. They had him surrounded,

except on the north entrance he had come in by. *You think you are so clever! With your little tricks! Nothing can defeat a Golden, a God!*

Again the three attacked simultaneously, and the missiles hit Beru from all three directions. The God raised his right hand and aimed it at Kyra. Then he raised his left and aimed it at Ikai. He concentrated and murmured something. A moment later, under their feet, there formed a well of burning lava. Kyra stared in horror; it seemed about to swallow her. A burning heat rose up her legs. The lower part of the sphere began to crack; if it broke she would fall into the lava. The same fate was threatening Ikai. She placed her hands on the sphere, shut her eyes and sent her own inner Power to strengthen it. Ikai did the same, using the disc. But the amount of Power in the disc was small and it was beginning to be exhausted.

Beru made a triumphant gesture. *Now we shall see.*

Maruk sent one last spear against Beru's sphere. The God turned his head, but kept his arms raised and his concentration on the two wells of lava. Brother and sister were struggling to maintain their spheres and not perish. Ikai used up all the Power in the disc, and with a final flash it went out. He saw the lava under his feet and knew he was lost. Desperately he tried to find his own Power and use it. He shut his eyes and searched. *Please, Oxatsi, help me find it!* But as so often before, he could not find it. He failed, and the sphere that protected him was destroyed. At the last moment he threw himself forward with all his might. He cleared the lava by an inch, and was left lying on his face on the corridor floor.

Beru pointed his finger at him. *Time to die, cockroach.* He was about to use his Power when Maruk leapt on to his back. Armed with two of the Executors' half-moon knives, he put all his strength into the jump and plunged them into the Golden's battered protective sphere.

Treacherous snake! he yelled in fury as Maruk stabbed again and again at the sphere. Beru's eyes turned red hot. He murmured, and two beams of fire came out of his eyes and caught Maruk in the chest, Maruk stepped back, leaving the two knives stuck in the sphere. He looked down at his chest, put his hands to the wound that had killed him and fell to his knees.

"I'm going to Liriana," he said. "She's waiting for me…"

"Nooooo!" Ikai cried in despair from the floor.

“You swine! Noooooo!” cried Kyra, and put her entire being into covering the well of lava under her feet with a layer of Ether.

Maruk breathed his last and died.

Beru raised his left hand towards Ikai, while with his right he kept the well under Kyra. He smiled in satisfaction and sent a ball of fire against Ikai. Without protection, the ball would kill him. Ikai hurled himself between the pods, and the ball burst where he had been standing an instant before. The explosion destroyed several of the pods. Flames, pieces of metal and burnt flesh flew out.

“Ikai!” Kyra cried. She had finished with the well of lava and was running down the corridor to her brother. She crossed the cavern, passing in front of Beru without sparing him a glance and ran down the south corridor to the site of the explosion. Ikai was lying on the floor among the shattered pods. His back was in flames.

She created a cloak of Ether and put it over her brother, putting out the flames. Ikai was stunned and burned in several places.

A new ball of fire exploded over her, and she had to take a couple of steps back from the impact. When she glanced aside at her brother she saw that the explosion had not reached him.

Beru’s laughter echoed in the chamber.

Idiots! I am a God and you are mere cockroaches!

He sent another ball of fire, and Kyra withdrew a couple more steps. In front of her there loomed a gigantic flame of terrifying intensity.

Beru smiled. *Time to bring this to an end! Nobody defies a Golden and lives!*

Kyra’s defense began to break beneath the giant flame which was trying to torch her. She sent more Power to the protective sphere, but knew it would not hold for long. The effort made her sink to one knee and go on holding off the attack with both hands stretched out.

It is useless, slave. I am far superior. It is futile to resist.

She half-closed her eyes with the effort. As she did so she glimpsed something behind Beru. A blackness was approaching from the north entrance, down the corridor. The Golden, focused on defeating Kyra, did not notice.

“Welcome,” said Kyra in greeting. “It’s taken you a while to come.”

Beru looked at her, at a loss. He looked right and left but could see nobody.

What new trick is this? You will not fool me.

“You didn’t make it easy for me,” said a seductive voice, heavy with sarcasm. “Wasn’t there a deeper dungeon for you to hide in anywhere in this Boundary?”

Beru turned to face the north corridor. In front of him, surrounded by a strange blackness, a brunette with feline features, carrying two black daggers, was staring at him.

Who are you? he asked in surprise.

“My name is Albana and I’m your death, Golden.”

The God murmured something and opened his mouth. Albana used her Power. From out of the Golden’s mouth came a gust of blazing fire. But Albana vanished, to reappear behind him. While Beru projected his fiery breath at the emptiness in front of him she plunged her daggers, with all the force of her Power, into the exact spots Maruk had stabbed with his knives. The battered sphere did not hold. It shattered into a thousand shards.

Beru spun round. He looked at Albana and opened his mouth. A flame began to emerge. Suddenly his mouth shut and the flame went out. His eyes stared at Albana’s hand under his jaw. The brunette had stabbed her dagger through his chin and into his brain. His eyes stared wide in horror.

“I told you,” she said, and finished him off by plunging the other dagger into his brain, up to the hilt.

She turned and saw Maruk’s body, then Kyra on her knees, exhausted and unable to stay upright.

“Ikai?” she said apprehensively.

Kyra pointed. “There.”

Albana ran.

Chapter 24

“Ikai!” Albana called desperately as she reached him. But he did not answer. He was lying face down on the floor, with the back of his clothes burnt and blood on his head. Albana was desperately afraid. She dropped down beside him and held his head in her lap.

“Come on, Ikai! Answer me!” But there was no reaction.

Kyra went to Maruk’s side and sat down beside him. Heartbroken, she realized he was dead.

“Damn you! I’ll kill you all! I swear I’ll kill you all! For Yosane, for Liriana, for Maruk, and for all the others! You’ll pay for it all!”

Albana turned Ikai over and tried to stir him into consciousness. She cleaned his head wound. He seemed to have hit a pod, or a part of it, when he had been thrown back by the explosion.

“Come back to me! You can’t leave me now we’ve found each other again!”

Kyra stared at them with her heart in a tight knot. “Tell me he’s not…”

Albana was trying every possible way of bringing Ikai back to the world of the living. She turned her head to Kyra. “I won’t let him leave,” she said, and began to blow air into his mouth.

Suddenly he started coughing and opened his eyes wide.

“He’s alive!” Kyra cried in delight.

Ikai looked at Albana, unable to focus his eyes properly. “Albana? Is this a dream?”

Both women burst out laughing.

“Yes, a dream,” said Albana. “See if this seems real.” She kissed him with such passion that he ended up coughing uncontrollably.

“That was quite a scare you gave us,” said Kyra.

“Then it’s real…you’re here?”

“Yes, I came to rescue you, my love.”

“And a good thing you did!” said Kyra.

“The God!” Ikai said, terrified as he began to remember.

“Take it easy, he’s dead,” Albana assured him.

He relaxed and put his hand to his head. It hurt like fury.

“We have to take a look at those burns on your back,” Albana said.

“Every day you get handsomer, brother. I don’t know how Albana can look at you. What with the scar on your face and the new burns on your back, you look lovely.”

“For me you’ll always be beautiful,” Albana told him with a loving smile.

Ikai blushed.

“It must be on the inside,” Kyra said.

“Even more so there,” Albana said, and holding his face in her hands, she kissed him again.

“We’d better look for medicines for those wounds,” said Kyra, and went away to search for them.

They found a blanket in one of the adjoining chambers and covered Maruk’s body. The three friends knelt around their fallen comrade. Holding hands, they begged Oxatsi to welcome her brave son to her breast. To give him a life in the beyond, by her side. To let him rejoin his beloved Liriana so they could be eternally happy. They prayed that she would accept their pleas on behalf of that brave man who had sacrificed his life fighting for the freedom of all men, fighting against evil and defending his friends in danger. Maruk of the Senoca: a friend, a brave man, a tireless fighter for freedom.

Kyra cried, which was a rare thing in her, and made Ikai’s eyes mist over. He had a huge knot in his throat and could not swallow.

Albana sighed. “When we agreed to set out to free the Boundaries we knew not all of us would make it.”

“He didn’t deserve to die like this,” Kyra said.

“None of us do, but it’s the risk we take and accept.”

Ikai's eyes lingered on them for a moment. "If anything should happen to either of you…" and could not go on, as he was overwhelmed with tears.

Kyra wiped away her own tears. "If it has to be, so be it. If I die fighting, don't shed a single tear for me. I'll have died for what I believe in and I'll be beside Oxatsi, content."

"Don't say that," Ikai scolded her.

"We can't hold back death, but we can fool her," Albana said. "I'll make sure we stay alive a little longer, until we've finished off the damn Gods." She said it with such conviction that Ikai and Kyra ended up smiling at the brunette.

They got to their feet, dried their tears and composed themselves.

"We have to take the upper levels until we reach the surface," Albana said.

Kyra shook her head. "There'll be a lot of Enforcers…"

"I've thought of a plan," said Ikai. "It's one that's already been tried, and it worked."

They used the low mist trick. Slowly and carefully they began to clear every level, one by one, of all the Enforcers, until they reached the surface. With Kyra and Albana working together with their own Powers to kill all the Enforcers and Ikai creating the fog, the Executors died before they could realize what was happening. They worked stealthily, taking no risks. It took them the whole day. At nightfall they managed to reach the gardens of the Dungeons of Oblivion. Here they breathed in the pleasant evening air and cleared the area with the efficiency of highly trained assassins. Albana dealt with the Guards at the gate, and everything was left in deathly silence. They hid the bodies, as there were still many Enforcers in the city.

Ikai could not take his eyes off Albana. Having her with him after all this time apart filled his heart with an immense joy, and at the same time with worry about the dangers they faced. He was perfectly aware that nobody was more able than Albana at looking after herself, but he could not avoid worrying every time she faced an Enforcer.

"Clear," Kyra said after combing the area.

Albana came back a moment later. "The whole area's free of Enforcers. The Dungeons are ours."

“Fine,” Ikai said. “Now we have to save those poor souls in the pods.”

“Shouldn’t we free the city first?” Kyra asked. “It wouldn’t do to be found out, and for them to suspect something’s wrong so that a thousand Executors suddenly fell on us ...”

“There’s only three of us,” Ikai said doubtfully.

Albana nodded. “For the three of us to go out into the streets and take on the Enforcers would be too risky. There must be hundreds of them in the city, and if the alarm’s sounded they’ll all be on top of us.”

“We wouldn’t be able to manage against all of them,” said Ikai, who was already trying to think of an alternative.

“But I know how to fix this problem,” Albana said. “I’ve done it before. I’ll need an assistant, though.” She eyed him mischievously.

“All right then, you can count on me. Kyra, you watch the Erudite. Don’t kill him. We need him alive to save the people in the pods.”

“And if he tries anything…”

Ikai shook his head. “Just don’t kill him, we need him. Please.”

“All right,” Kyra said. Her shoulders sagged.

It was midnight when there came a deafening noise in the main square of the capital. It rose to the sky and spread throughout the streets of the city. The Great Monolith of the Gods had fallen. Albana winked at Ikai and smiled. The mission of sabotage and destruction had been a success.

“You’re wonderful,” he said, and kissed her.

She smiled broadly. “Hmm, I like it. I’ll have to plan a few more secret missions just so that you kiss me like that.”

“You know I’ll kiss you anyway, mission or no mission.”

“That kiss had an extra charge of emotion in it.”

“Don’t know why you say things like that. I always kiss you with all my heart.”

“I know, silly, but I like to make you blush.”

“But why?”

“I like messing with you,” she replied. Her smile turned mischievous.

“One day you’re going to drive me crazy. You’re impossible.”

Albana laughed and kissed him again, with all her heart. “I love you.”

“And I love you too.”

“Because I destroy monoliths and kiss so well?”

“Yes, exactly because of that,” he said with a smile. He stroked her cheek. “Come on, let’s get back before Kyra loses her patience with the Erudite.”

Two Executors appeared in the square. Ikai tensed and Albana drew her two daggers, but the Executors passed them by without noticing them. They walked aimlessly, looking up at the moon, lost.

“It worked,” Albana said. “Without the Monolith they’re harmless.”

“Let’s go back.”

They found Kyra on the last level of the Dungeons. She had a dagger in her hand and was sitting on the floor with her legs crossed. In front of her the Erudite was tied to the monolith. Kyra’s protective sphere was raised.

“Kyra…”

“Take it easy, brother, we’re playing a game of truth or death.”

“I love that game,” Albana said.

“What game is this?” Ikai asked. He had the feeling that they were both making it up.

“It’s a very simple game. I ask a question and he answers. He can choose between truth and death.”

Ikai looked at his sister in puzzlement. “And who decides whether or not he’s told the truth?”

“I do, of course.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course. This is going to end well, for sure.”

The Erudite stared blankly at them. His face showed the terror he was feeling.

“I don’t think he relishes being a prisoner in the hands of slaves,” Albana said. She was toying with one of her black daggers.

“Do you like the idea?” Kyra asked him.

No…No… the Erudite replied.

“Good. He’s told the truth. I believe he’s beginning to understand the game. Tell me: how is it that a couple of Gods have got their hands dirty coming all the way here?”

The Erudite hesitated. *I… I should not…it is top secret.*

“Oh yes, you should, believe me,” Kyra assured him.

Prince Asu will kill me if I speak, he muttered.

“And what do you think I’m going to do to you myself?” said Kyra. “And I’m here and itching to tear your guts out.”

The Golden trembled. *All right then…Prince Asu sent us himself…*

The three exchanged puzzled looks. “Why? He already has his Enforcers to do the dirty work.”

This is a very important job… He sent Lord Beru to direct the operation himself. And he sent me to ensure that the extraction was done with all guarantees. Only an Erudite with advanced knowledge can handle the monolith and operate the pods correctly. The Enforcers would not be capable of it. They lack the necessary intellect. He raised his head.

“Don’t get all haughty with me, or else I’ll carve that “intellect” of yours out of your head,” Kyra threatened, and the Erudite cringed in terror.

Albana tilted her head inquiringly. “And there’s something else you’re not telling us, isn’t there?”

I… well… it is a rumor…

Albana motioned him to go on speaking. “Tell us more.”

It is said… that Prince Asu…. is doing all this behind the back of the High King, his father.

The three looked at each other again, this time with concern.

“That’s very serious… how did he dare?”

*The Prince has his own plans…*the Erudite said, and fell silent, as though he had committed an act of treason.

“That’s interesting,” Albana said. “Very, very interesting …”

Ikai stepped in at this point. “How do we take all those people out of the pods without them losing their lives in the process?”

The Erudite thought before answering. *I can do it. I can bring them out of the state they are in and revive them. But in exchange I beg you to spare my life.*

Kyra stepped forward and put the dagger against his eye.

“Kyra, stop it,” Ikai said.

“We’re not negotiating with this murderer. He’s already killed hundreds of people.”

Ikai crouched down beside the Erudite. “If you revive them and help us get them out of here, I’ll spare your life.”

“Ikai, don’t!” Kyra protested.

“But if you betray us and anything happens to them, I’ll let my sister cut you into little pieces.”

“That’s better,” she said.

It… will not be… necessary. I will help you… I will free them. They will all come out alive.

“They’d better,” Kyra said fiercely. She mimicked cutting his throat.

They untied the Erudite and allowed him to set to work. Albana and Kyra did not take their eyes off him. Erudite or not, he was a Golden, and this made him dangerous, But the God was so terrified he did not even glance at them. Instead he concentrated on manipulating the monolith or “fountain of knowledge” as he called it. It took him some time to calibrate it and prepare the process. They had not meant to revive the prisoners, so the process for doing so had not been foreseen. He had to create it from scratch. Kyra raged and cursed, and Albana had to calm her. The Gods never wasted an ounce of energy or power on something they had no intention of using, and this was just another example of it. Unfortunately.

Finally, after hours and hours of work, the Erudite announced he was ready to begin the process. Ikai moved closer to him.

“For your own good, I hope you don’t fail. I won’t be able to stop them” – he gestured towards the two women – “if you do.”

I…I will try with one person first. And if it is a success I will proceed with the rest, he said, and went to check the nearest pod on his right.

“I think that’s a very sensible idea.” Ikai agreed.

“Inside that pod there’s a human being,” Kyra said threateningly. “A good person who had never done any harm. You’d better get her out of there alive.”

The Erudite shot her a glance, then looked away. Albana smiled at the sight of the Golden in terror. She winked at Kyra, who nodded. The Erudite activated the process. The Monolith flashed, and in that first pod the process of revival began. Fortunately for all, the experiment was a success. The first person recovered. It was a young woman. They helped her out; she was weak and shivering with cold, and they covered her with a blanket.

“We’re going to need help,” Ikai said when he saw the state she was in.

“I’ll deal with it,” Albana said, and left.

The Erudite began to revive the remainder of the people in the last floor. Ikai and Kyra helped them out of the pods and tended to them. After a while Albana reappeared with a hundred elderly men and women carrying blankets, water and food.

“I spread the word around. We’ll soon have a thousand people to help us.”

“That’s great!” Ikai said. His admiration for Albana grew day by day. Whatever she set her mind to, she managed to accomplish one way or another, however difficult or hard the task.

“I’m going back to the surface, to organize everybody,” she said, and disappeared again.

The brunette remained on the surface assembling a human chain of help and organizing provisions and supplies. Before she realized, there were more than two thousand volunteers ready to do whatever was needed to help. Ikai took charge of organizing things inside, keeping a close eye on the recovery of the unfortunate prisoners they were liberating from the pods, and making sure someone was assigned to help each one of them. Kyra meanwhile watched over the Erudite as if she were his shadow. It took them four days and nights to free and evacuate all the people.

At nightfall on the fifth day Kyra, Albana and Ikai were having something to eat around an improvised camp fire in the middle of the gardens, above the Dungeons of Oblivion, They were utterly exhausted, and had simply dropped down there. None of them spoke. They were eating the

food that had been provided for them and drinking fresh water from a jug which a kind old lady had brought them.

Ikai turned to several old people who were hovering nearby, trying to serve them.

“Don’t worry about us. Make sure everybody’s looked after and find them somewhere to stay in the city. Let them rest and recover before they set out for their own villages.”

The old people protested, since they wanted to thank the three for all they had done for them, but Ikai insisted. In the end he succeeded in convincing them, and they left.

“You’re a good man,” Kyra told him.

Albana smiled. “The best in the world.”

Ikai blushed. “It’s the most sensible thing. We can manage.”

Albana crawled across to him and kissed him on the cheek. “I wouldn’t change you for anything.”

“I wouldn’t change you either.”

They kissed as if they had just realized how much they loved each other.

Kyra tilted her head. “Hey, you’re not alone,” she joked. “Behave yourselves.”

Albana and Ikai laughed. The three shared a moment of affection and camaraderie, sitting by the fire with the moon shining in the sky and a gentle breeze caressing their hair and faces. They enjoyed letting their tired bodies relax, forgetting how sore they were, as if this were a night to enjoy and forget all their woes.

Ikai fell asleep with a piece of bread in one hand and a slice of cheese in the other. Albana covered him with a blanket, kissed his forehead and went to sit beside Kyra.

“What news of Adamis?” she asked.

“Nothing… and I’m worried. Have you heard from him?”

“No. Nothing. But if he hasn’t got in touch, he’s not in danger. That’s what we all agreed.”

“Yes, but he won’t get in touch even if he is in danger. I know him well. He won’t want to endanger us. He’d rather sacrifice himself, the idiot. And

knowing that is eating me away inside."

"That does him credit. It's very noble of him."

"He's an idiot."

Albana smiled at Kyra and hugged her. "Don't worry. I'm sure he's all right."

"He'd better be, or else he'll have me to contend with," Kyra said sulkily, and threw her piece of bread into the fire.

The two friends fell asleep leaning against each other. They were all so tired that they slept well into the morning. Neither the sun, nor the singing of birds, nor the last elderly people leaving the walled precinct woke them. At last Ikai managed to open his eyes and went to see if there was anybody left inside to evacuate. He found no one. Everybody had gone to safety. He felt an immense relief.

Albana went to check the warehouses beside the dungeon entrance to see if she could find more food and blankets to take to the people they had freed. Kyra woke up and went to check whether their prisoner was still in the same place. They had locked him up in the last sub-level under threat of cutting him to pieces if he tried to reach the surface. Imprisoning a God was a complicated business, but if you scared him enough it was not impossible. She found him by the monolith; he had not moved at all.

Ikai was gazing up at the blue sky, wondering what their next move should be now that they had freed all the Boundaries, when Albana came out of a huge building she had been inspecting.

"You'd better come and see this," she said, her face grave.

Kyra and Ikai hurried to follow her. In the half-light they found hundreds of crates perfectly stored, ready to be transported.

"It's a huge warehouse…" Ikai said.

"They'll have food stored," said Kyra. "That'll come in very handy."

Albana shook her head. She pointed to a crate she had opened. The other two looked inside.

"By Oxatsi!" cried Kyra.

"It's filled with charged discs!" said Ikai. He picked up one and examined it.

Albana opened several more crates. "They're all full," she said hoarsely.

Ikai was looking towards the far end of the huge warehouse filled with crates. “I can’t believe it!”

“If all those crates are full,” Kyra said, holding her head in her hands, “that means thousands of discs.”

“Imagine what Asu could do with all this,” Albana said.

“That must be his plan.” Ikai half-closed his eyes. “With all these discs he could launch a war against everybody: men and Golden.”

“If he wins,” said Kyra, “he’ll put all of us in pods to squeeze our lives out of us and get hold of more discs. We’d never see the light of day again.”

“There can’t be any doubt about it,” Albana agreed. “This technology changes things completely.”

“Do you think he’d dare start a war?” Ikai asked, without much hope of getting a negative answer.

Albana nodded. “With those discs there’d be no stopping him. His soldiers would be able to fight all day and replenish the energy they’d consumed without any fear of shortening their lifespan. A Golden’s greatest fear is of growing old. That’s what holds them back when it comes to using their Power. With the discs, their soldiers would go out to fight with nothing to fear, using all their Power. The other Golden won’t do it. They won’t be able to balance the explosion of Power they’ll be hit with, and for that reason they’ll lose.”

“But they’ll fight with all their might when they see that’s what the others are doing,” said Kyra.

“But by the time they do, it’ll be too late. Asu and his troops will hit them by surprise and with all their Power. Full blast. And they’ll be able to do that for as long as they want. All they have to do is use the Discs, so as not to lose life.”

Ikai was deeply concerned. “Yes, I can see that …”

“And the worst thing is… these discs will make Asu immortal. He’ll live forever.”

Kyra raised her fist. “Nonsense. His days are numbered. I’ll cut his head off.”

“Count on me!” Albana said, and winked.

Ikai was looking thoughtful. “I need the Erudite, I want to ask him something.”

“I’ll bring him,” Kyra said, and came back with the Erudite. His golden face had turned very pale, and there was fear in his eyes. He walked with bent head, dragging his feet. He no longer looked like a God.

Ikai gestured at the open crate. “Why didn’t you tell us about this before?”

You did not ask… he replied, eying Kyra. *I told the truth about everything you asked me,* he added in haste.

“Are there more discs than this?” Ikai asked.

No, these are all there are.

“How many have you already sent to Asu?”

A few crates, to be tested among his own faithful.

“You mean to say we’ve got all the discs here that have been harvested?”

Yes. These are all there are.

“Why are they here, and why haven’t they already been sent?”

They were going to be sent when the moment was right. Prince Asu will send someone he trusts to pick them up. There are many spies inside and outside the House, and the Prince does not want to risk his secret being discovered.

“Until he’s ready to attack, you mean?” Albana put in.

That is so.

Kyra picked up one of the discs. “That means we have his secret weapon! He’s in our hands. Without all this, he won’t be able to start a war.”

“True,” Albana said, and narrowed her eyes. “We have his treasure. It’s ours.”

Ikai was looking at the crates. “The discs… can they be used on men? Do they have any effect on us?”

The Erudite shook his head. *We have experimented with it, but it does not have any effect on you. Your organisms are not capable of absorbing the essence of life.*

“In that case they’re no use to us,” Albana said. “We ought to destroy them so that Asu can’t get his hands on them.”

“I think so too,” Kyra said.

Ikai nodded. “It’s the sensible thing.”

“Let the Erudite do the honors,” Kyra said. She turned a look of pure fury on him.

Me? No, my prince would go mad with rage… all the work done… the incalculable value… I cannot…

Albana threatened him with her black daggers. “Set fire to the warehouse.”

The Erudite muttered again: *No… not that…*

Kyra took a step toward him, looking as though she were about to cut his head off. Frightened, the Erudite set fire to the first line of crates.

“That’s better,” she said, and dragged him out of the warehouse. Albana and Ikai followed them. The flames took hold inside the building and climbed up the front as far as the roof. They watched the fire devour the warehouse: the Erudite on his knees, defeated, the three Senoca looking on proudly, filled with joy.

“What wouldn’t I give to see Asu’s face when he finds out,” Kyra said.

“He’ll have a fit of rage,” said Albana. “I hope he bursts into flames.”

Ikai sighed as he stared at the black smoke filling the sky. “We’ve managed to put an end to his plans.”

The three watched half the warehouse collapsing under the flames with a loud crackling. There was no mistaking the joy on their faces. The flames began to consume the other half of the building.

A powerful mental message reached them.

What is going on here?

The Erudite looked up towards the entrance in the wall.

Lord Champion!

At the entrance stood a formidable Warrior-God whom Ikai recognized at once. It was Asu’s champion. Behind him were a dozen Warrior-Gods and twenty or so Custodians.

“Treachery!” shouted the Erudite aloud.

Albana hit him on the head with the hilts of her daggers, and he fell unconscious. “Run!” shouted Ikai,

They sped towards the back wall, crossing the gardens like gazelles pursued by tigers. Several fiery javelins narrowly missed them. Kyra used her Power and covered them with a heavy fog. Albana used her own and raised a dark barrier behind them. When they reached the wall Kyra and Ikai, holding hands, levitated over it. Albana used her Power and crawled up it like a spider.

The last thing they saw as they fled was all the Soldiers and Custodians fighting the fire in an attempt to save what was left of the warehouse and its contents.

Chapter 25

Eyes blazing, Asu stared at the crates of discs which contained the slaves' life-essence. The walls in the chamber of knowledge of the House of Fire, in the Second Ring, seemed to sweat in the face of the Prince's fury.

"This is all you managed to save?" he asked Iradu. The champion was still recovering from his wounds, and moved with a grimace of pain.

"Yes, my Lord. When we arrived to pick up the discs the warehouse was burning. It is all we managed to rescue."

"It is not even a third of what Beru had collected!"

The enormous warrior bent his head, so that his long braid fell to one side. "I am deeply sorry."

"By the flames of my ancestors, I will kill those interfering slaves! Tell me what happened again."

Iradu told him what he had found once they had managed to put out the fire and save some of the crates.

"I cannot believe that those cockroaches managed to kill my cousin Beru and free all the slaves from the pods."

"They were three, my Lord. I was able to recognize them. The slave that Adamis helped and her brother. The third one, if I am not mistaken, is one of the Shadows trained by Oskas."

"Albana… I remember her. And the other two are that insolent Kyra and her brother. Yes, I know who they are, and they will pay with fire and suffering. They will pay!"

Moltus stopped operating the red monolith of knowledge and went over to the crates. He picked up one of the discs.

"What are you doing, you old fool?"

"I must check the purity of the harvest, your Highness. If your Highness will allow me." He bowed clumsily.

With an impatient wave, Asu allowed him to continue.

“Bring me the Claw,” Moltus said to one of his assistants, who brought him the golden bracelet with the claw-shaped clasp and put it on his right wrist. He chuckled with anticipation, then placed the disc on the circle engraved on the back of the bracelet. Once it was in place there was a click, and the claw clamped onto his wrist. The five pins in the nails buried themselves in the old Erudite’s flesh. The upper part of the disc began to spin, glinting as it did so. Black veins began to appear on his arm and slowly spread throughout his body.

“Well?” Asu demanded impatiently.

Moltus inhaled deeply. On his face there appeared a smile of satisfaction. Then he looked from side to side, as though he were listening to something.

“The voices are telling me it is an excellent harvest. Life is returning to my body.”

“You and your damn voices!”

Moltus bent over in fear. “They tell me they will bring long life to our people.”

“Not *our* people, *me* and my own people!”

“Of course, your Highness.”

“How much essence of life do we have in those crates?”

Moltus nodded several times. “Enough to carry out your plans, my Lord.”

“Are you sure, you old fool?”

“Yes, my Lord, the voices say there are enough discs.”

“There had better be, or else I will put an apple in your mouth and roast you alive like a pig.”

Moltus slumped his shoulders over his staff, his head bent.

“I could send troops to the Boundary to capture the escaped slaves,” Iradu suggested.

“No, it would take too long. We will soon have all the slaves we want. Not only from our own Boundary, but from all the rest.”

“The campaign against the slaves?” Iradu asked.

Asu nodded. “The Army of the Five High Kings has set out already for the great continent. Soon the slaves will be ours.” He gave a twisted smile. “Well, all those who survive. I will put all of them in pods and squeeze them until there is not a drop of life left in them. We will obtain a constant production of essence of life which will feed us so that we do not age. We will live forever!”

Moltus coughed. “Do not forget, my master, that they must reproduce, to generate more able bodies from which life can continue to be extracted.”

Asu frowned. “We will breed them like cattle and squeeze the life out of them. Start preparing all the details for breeding and mass production.”

Moltus chuckled triumphantly. “Of course, my Lord. Thus the circle will close and we will obtain an infinite flow of life.”

“We will be immortal! Immortal!” Asu shouted, so forcefully that the walls of the chamber could barely contain his thirst for power and eternal life. He turned to his Champion. “Iradu, is everything ready?”

“Yes, my Prince, as you ordered.”

Lord Erre came into the chamber and bowed. “Your Highness.”

“Cousin,” Asu replied with only the trace of a bow in return.

“The meetings have been agreed.”

“When?”

“The first one will be tonight, the second tomorrow evening.”

“Very well. It is time to seal alliances,” Asu said, and his eyes distilled fire.

Adamis was waiting anxiously for Sormacus to come back. He needed information, and he needed it urgently. He began to pace around the cellar of the temple where they were hiding in the Fifth Ring, and a sharp pain attacked his stomach. For once he bore the punishment gladly. For a moment it made him forget a much deeper pain that had been torturing him for days: that of Notaplo’s death. Every time he thought of his friend and mentor’s end, something inside him burnt, demanding revenge from the

skies. But when the feeling of rage passed it was replaced by one of intense pain and unfathomable sorrow.

He gazed up at the somber ceiling and took a deep breath. *I am so sorry, my old friend. Thank you for everything you taught me, for everything you did for us. I will soon join you and we will be able to go on philosophizing about life, Men, Golden, nature and the search for eternal life.*

Sormacus came down the stairs in a hurry. Judging from the expression on his face, the news he brought was not good.

“What did you find out?” Adamis asked him bluntly.

“The situation is becoming critical,” he replied, with concern in his voice. “The Houses have called their Soldiers to assemble, as well as the Healers. The Rings have been closed. Nobody may come in or go out, the boundaries of each House are closed. Martial law has been proclaimed. First it was the House of Fire, followed by the House of Earth. The Houses of Ether and Water had no choice but to do the same.”

“And the House of Air?”

“It remains neutral, but has also put its army on alert and is allowing nobody to cross its Ring.”

“As serious as that?”

“Yes. War seems imminent.”

“What has brought on this situation?”

“The freeing of the Boundaries. It is rumored that all of them have fallen, one by one, and that only the House of Fire have kept theirs. This makes it the most powerful. The balance of forces has been broken and the old grudges are coming back to the surface. The nobles of every House are looking to gain position as they see the chance to make the opposite house bend the knee. Especially the House of Fire, with the support of the House of Earth.”

Adamis shook his head and put his hands behind his back. “And my Father?”

“He is in a difficult position. He has been accused of dealing with the Banished House, the House of Hila.”

“My father would never deal with those worshippers of death.”

“Your Father has formally accused the House of Air of the murder of their First Erudite… which has made the situation even worse.”

“I do not believe it was the House of Air. I have no doubt it was Asu, although I cannot prove it.”

“Unfortunately the knife found in Notaplo’s body belongs to the House of Air. It has the Royal seal.”

“A trick to make my Father accuse the wrong person and force the House of Air to lose its neutrality.”

“Allying itself with the Houses of Fire and Earth…” Sormacus reasoned.

“It would seem so. It is well played. A very skillful move.”

“Let us hope that your Father will not act. A false step in this situation would bring on a catastrophic war.”

“My Father will not act without having meditated his moves beforehand. I do not think he will fall into that trap.”

“Let us hope not, for the good of all. Unfortunately it will be hard for me to gather more information now that the Rings have been closed and martial law declared.”

“What about your contacts in the other Rings?”

“In hiding. The Soldiers are searching the Rings house by house, for spies. They are imprisoning anybody in the least suspicious, or who might have contacts with the other Houses. Accesses to the Palace have been sealed, and nobody is being permitted to pass without the express consent of the Royal Family. There are checks at many points in each Ring. I am afraid we cannot count on their help.”

“Do not worry, we will manage to get out of this mire,” Adamis said, though without much confidence. Suddenly he felt a tingle at his waist. He put his hand in the pocket of his robe and found Ariadne’s charmed pearl. He took it out and gazed at it on his palm. The pearl vibrated. He closed his hand over it and concentrated.

“Adamis,” came Ariadne’s mental message in a whisper.

“I am listening, Ariadne. Where are you? Are you all right?”

“I am fine… at least for now. I am at the Royal Palace of the House of Fire.”

Adamis used his Power to project Ariadne's messages so that Sormacus could hear them too.

"How did you get there?" Sormacus said in alarm. "You have to get out, you're in great danger. The Houses have declared war."

"I know. But I can't get out. They've sealed the Palace. I'm trapped."

"Have they found you?" Adamis asked.

"No. I'm safe for the moment. I'm a guest of Lord Erre, Prince Asu's cousin. He is rather attracted to me… He's been flirting, trying to woo me. He invited me to the Palace, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. I couldn't reject him. But now I can't get out. Nobody can."

"We will have to get you out of there," Adamis said.

"No, this might play in our favor. Here I can get valuable information at a key moment."

"But it is too dangerous," Adamis said, greatly concerned. "You are in the lion's den. If they discover you they will kill you."

"That is a risk we always run."

"Have you gathered any useful information?" Sormacus asked her.

"Yes. Something strange is going on. Lord Erre had a meeting with Asu and other nobles of the Royal House around mid-morning. When he came back I couldn't get him to tell me what is going on, but he was very serious, extremely serious. He has called his Guard and ordered them to arm."

"They are getting ready for battle," Adamis said.

"And there's something else. When I asked him whether we would have dinner together this evening, he told me that much to his chagrin he would not be able to, that he had something very important to see to. But he said he would definitely come to see me in the morning."

Adamis' attention was caught by this. "See to something? Tonight?"

"Yes. I don't know where, but I could try and find out."

"It is too dangerous," Sormacus said. "He will be suspicious if you show too much interest,"

"Do not endanger yourself any more, Ariadne," Adamis told her. "Try to survive and take no risks."

“Somebody’s coming,” Ariadne said, and the communication was abruptly broken.

Adamis and Sormacus exchanged looks of alarm. Adamis thought of using the pearl, but it would put her in danger and he rejected the idea. He put it away.

“She will be fine,” he told Sormacus. But they both knew that Ariadne’s chances of coming out of there alive were very limited.

Night fell, and Adamis said goodbye to Sormacus.

“Are you sure?” the Son of Arutan said.

“Yes. Asu is going to attempt something tonight, and we need to know what it is.”

Sormacus bent his head. “Very well.”

“Warn the Elders of Arutan of what is happening.”

“Very well, I will warn our leaders.”

“And good luck.”

“The same to you.”

Chapter 26

Idana placed her hand on the great translucent monolith. The first time she had done so she had been afraid, but now it comforted her. The golden artifact kept the Senoca hidden from the Gods. It gave her a sense of protection. She gave thanks to Oxatsi for Notaplo's and Aruma's help with building the object there, in the heart of the New Shelter.

The apothecary was at the top of the cliff watching the fishing boats bringing in the day's catch. It was an image which always filled her with joy, almost as much as healing some sick person with one of her potions. Not only for what it represented symbolically−the people of the Sea were once again sailing the waters of Mother Oxatsi− but because it meant food, prosperity.

She followed the boats with her gaze until they entered the white cove where the harbor began. The New Shelter, as the Senoca had named their new home, was growing day by day, and Idana marveled at how swiftly it was doing so. Thousands of little fishermen's cottages rose along the coast, seeming to multiply from one week to the next. Inland, too, farms and fields devoted to cultivation and cattle-rearing spread toward the forests behind them.

Her eyes turned to the breakwater, which only a year ago had been insecure and relatively small. Now, on the other hand, it was large and robust and defied Mother Sea's fury. More than a hundred people were working on it, getting ready for the arrival of the fishing boats. She turned toward the cottages behind her: every day they were a little bigger, a little better cared-for. The Senoca worked day and night to improve things, to make a worthy home in which to live in freedom and harmony. And little by little, with much effort and tenacity, they were succeeding. She sighed. How she loved that place and her people.

"They're coming back," commented Oltas, chief of the warriors and her personal bodyguard.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something more important than following me everywhere?” she asked, although she knew well the answer she would get.

“You’re our Leader now, and we must protect you.”

She sighed again. Behind Oltas, the half dozen warriors who accompanied her everywhere were waiting at the ready.

“Leader only because the others aren’t here.”

“Leader because you’re one of the Heroes, and because the others made it clear before they left.”

“You’re not letting me out of your sights, are you?”

There was a broad smile on Oltas’ face, framed by his thick black beard. “Not now, not ever. You’re too valuable for all of us.”

Suddenly shouts made everyone look in the direction of the forest. A young man was running down the hill. He waved his arms and shouted something Idana could not understand. He reached them panting breathlessly, his forehead drenched in sweat, fear on his face. He tried to speak.

“Apothecary… help…” he managed to articulate.

“What’s the matter?”

“Come with me quickly!”

“But what’s happened? Is it an accident?”

He pulled at Idana’s arm, his face twisted with worry. “My family. We have to help them.”

“All right,” she said, “take me to them.” She feared an accident. The Senoca were expanding into the neighboring territories; in their urge to build and develop they did not always take account of the risks, and accidents were liable to occur.

“Where are they?” Oltas asked.

“Behind the woods to the west, by the river.”

“Right. I know the place. Come on.”

The group followed the young man, who immediately started to run towards the forest. They crossed the woods and raced down to an area of open land by the river, and what they found left Idana speechless.

“By Oxatsi!” cried Oltas, and the warriors readied their weapons.

“What… what’s happened to them?” Idana stammered.

Tears were running down the young man’s cheeks. “I don’t know. I found them like that.”

Standing before them were his father, mother and two sisters. They were unmoving, frozen alive, like statues of ice.

“They… they’re… frozen…” muttered Oltas in amazement.

Idana went closer to them and examined them. It was true, they were frozen where they stood. Judging by the position of their bodies and the expressions on their faces, they had not even realized the fact.

“You will save them, won’t you?” the young man begged.

Idana smiled at him. “I’ll do all I can. We’ll need some wood, for a fire.”

“Sure!” the young man cried, and ran off to fetch some.

“Fire?” repeated Oltas. “Do you really believe…?”

“No. There’s nothing we can do for them. Now listen to me carefully. It’s very important. I want you to run to the New Shelter and raise the alarm. Do it quietly and make them all follow the proper procedure.”

“The alarm? In the whole New Shelter?”

“Yes. It wasn’t a Man who did this. This is the work of a God.”

Oltas stared at her, wide-eyed. He looked back at the family who had been frozen alive, and finally understood. “I’ll do as you say.”

“One more thing. Send trackers. There’s a God inside our Boundary.”

He stared at her with sunken eyes and deep unease in his voice. “They’ve found us?”

“Yes. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Are they coming?”

“They will, very soon.”

“Right, I’ll go at once. And you? What are you going to do?”

“Ask for help.”

A long way away from the New Shelter, in the west of the continent, Kyra emerged from the portal and fell to the ground, writhing in pain. She waited for the unpleasant feeling to pass, then got to her feet. Ikai and Albana were watching her. They had crossed a moment before and had already recovered.

“What now?” Albana asked.

Kyra pointed upwards. “Now we go up to the upper chamber of the temple, and from there out to the surface. Well, to a lake above the temple. So get ready for a dip.”

“Let’s get a move on,” said Ikai. “If this is the only Temple close to a Portal, maybe the Golden will have used it to get here as well.”

“And they might use it again.” added Albana.

“Do you think they’re following us?”

“We left them busy with the fire, but as soon as they’ve got it under control they’ll come for us.”

“Then let’s get out of here.”

The three set off at a run and soon reached the surface. Just as Kyra had warned them, they emerged in the middle of the lake. They swam to the shore and without wasting a moment looking back, disappeared into a forest. Night overtook them a long way from the temple, and they stopped in a clearing by a group of massive boulders with a brook running between them. They drank and dropped wearily to the ground, at the end of their strength. Ikai and Albana gazed at each other, hand in hand, but were unable to say a single word. Kyra gazed up at the moon between the clouds, and her eyes closed. The events of the last few days, and their escape, had exhausted them. They slept until dawn, when the singing and fluttering of birds woke them up.

Kyra felt she needed another week’s sleep.

Ikai mimed distaste at his own smell. “I’m going to take a bath. I need it,”

She smiled. They all stank. “And Albana?”

“She’s gone to check nobody’s following us. She’ll be back shortly.”

Kyra nodded and got up slowly. Her brother wandered off looking for deeper water and when he found it, he dove in.

She scanned their surroundings. It was an attractive green landscape, full of life. It smelt of resin and leaf-mould. Suddenly the bracelet on her right hand started to vibrate. She narrowed her eyes and looked at it in surprise. *The communication bracelet… that's strange. It must be bad news. We're not supposed to use them to communicate, unless it's something really serious…* She took out her disc and got ready to receive the message. The disc of Power gave off a flash. Someone was trying to communicate. *Something's going wrong. Who can it be? Idana?* Her stomach began to turn, and she cursed at being unable to control her nerves. The bracelet vibrated and the disc flashed again almost simultaneously. A silhouette began to take shape amid a gray mist. It was not a mental message, it was a manifestation. Now she was really nervous. The figure finished taking shape before her eyes. Kyra recognized it and cried out: "Adamis!"

"Greetings, my princess," the Golden Prince said. His eyes were shining with the intensity of the love he felt.

"Adamis, how wonderful to see you!"

"I am even happier to see you are well. What happened to your hair?"

She put her hand to her head, the area that had been burnt. "It's a long story. I'll tell you another time. I can't believe you're right here in front of me. You have no idea how much I've missed you! I so wanted to see you!"

"And so have I, my love."

Suddenly Kyra realized something, and fear took hold of her heart. "Wait. Are you all right? What's happening? Why are you making contact?"

Adamis made a calming gesture. "Do not worry, I am fine, there is nothing wrong with me."

"Are you sure? You're not lying to me? We agreed to make contact only if things were really dangerous…"

"I am not lying to you, I am fine. The situation is dangerous, but not for me. It is for you, for Men. That is the reason I am contacting you. To warn you."

Kyra stared at his eyes, trying to read her beloved's soul. Something was not right.

"Where are you? You're not safe, getting better with Aruma, are you?"

Once again he repeated his soothing gesture.

“I will tell you everything. I do not have much time, they might intercept the message, so I will come straight to the point. You must promise me that you will not lose your temper. We have very little time. You must restrain yourself. Promise me.”

She nodded. “All right, then. Go ahead.”

He told her, briefly and precisely, what he had been through and the information he had discovered since they had parted. When he finished he noticed that she was making a superhuman effort to control her anger.

“You’re in the Eternal City! In the lion’s den!”

“Kyra…”

She sighed deeply, then stamped her foot and at last managed to calm down.

“When we’re together, you’re going to have to listen to me.”

Adamis smiled and bent his head.

“You must warn everybody. The Golden are sending an army of gods to finish off all Men. There will be Gods from all Five Houses. It is a maneuver by the High Kings to gain time while they complete their plan.”

Kyra nodded. “I’ll warn everybody. Don’t worry.”

He smiled at her and blew her a kiss.

“I love you, my conceited Prince.”

“And I love you, my rebellious shrew.”

She reached out her hand to touch him, and he did the same with his own until they almost touched.

“I’d give anything to be with you,” she said.

“And so would I, my love.”

“And now you’re going to tell me that we can’t, that there are more important things than our own happiness at stake, that we must make sacrifices and fight for the good of our own people.”

“I did not say that, you did…”

She wrinkled her nose and made a face. “Hell!” she muttered.

Adamis smiled sweetly at her in return. His beautiful face shone with the Golden luster.

“Don’t smile at me like that, or I’ll lose my head.”

“I smile at you with the happiness and love I feel for you. I cannot help myself. When I am with you I am happy.”

“And me with you. You fill my heart. I want to hold you, touch you… kiss you…” She reached out further and the image blinked. Her hand passed through his. She heaved a deep sigh, filled with melancholy and frustration, and let her arms fall.

“So do I. There is nothing I wish more than to hold you in my arms. But this is not the moment.”

Stubbornly, she shook her head.

“You know I am right. We owe ourselves to the cause we fight for. We cannot allow ourselves to be carried away by selfishness, no matter how much we love each other, no matter how much we may long to be together.”

“I preferred you when you were an unbearable Golden Prince. Now you’re worse than my brother.”

Adamis laughed. I shall take that as a compliment.”

“I know you’re right, but I wish it weren’t so.”

“We must be strong, the end is near. We must save our people from the terrible end that is coming.”

Kyra stood tall and looked straight at his eyes. “I won’t fail you.”

His gaze lingered on her an instant. “I know, little shrew. Now I must go.”

“No…”

“Soon we will be together.”

“Promise me you’ll survive. Promise me we’ll be together.”

He nodded slowly. “I promise.”

His image blurred, then disappeared completely, leaving her engulfed in sadness. A flock of blue-feathered birds flew over her head, and she stared up at them.

“For freedom!” she cried.

A moment later Ikai came back. His hair was wet and he looked refreshed.

“Who were you talking to?”

“To Adamis. He contacted me. We’re in serious trouble.”

Ikai’s face turned somber. He readied himself for the bad news.

“Well, that makes a change,” came Albana’s sarcastic comment. They turned toward the trees and saw her appear. “The day we get good news, we’ll die of shock.” She smiled ironically.

“Are we being followed?” Ikai asked.

Albana shook her head. “What did Adamis say to you?” she asked.

Kyra told them. When she had finished, Albana snorted. Ikai was silent in thought, weighing up the implications of his sister’s news.

Suddenly the bracelets on their right hands began to vibrate. Kyra turned to Ikai, who looked back in surprise.

“Another communication,” she said.

He shook his head. He knew it would be more bad news. Brother and sister took out their discs. The bracelets vibrated and the discs flashed. A human form appeared between them. Kyra and Ikai waited anxiously for it to become recognizable. Finally the image vibrated and Idana appeared before them.

“Idana!” Kyra cried. “Are you all right?”

Their friend nodded.

“And the New Shelter?” Ikai asked worriedly.

“It’s fine for the moment. But I fear it won’t be for long.”

“If you’ve got in touch,” Albana said, “it must be something serious. What is it?”

“They’re coming,” Idana replied, and the three understood at once.

She told them what she had seen. The New Shelter was in a state of Alert. All the Senoca had armed themselves and gone into hiding, as they had agreed they would should this situation ever come up.

“Adamis has confirmed that the Golden are sending an army,” Kyra told her.

“Oh no! That’s dreadful! I was hoping it was a false alarm. That there might be some other explanation…”

“No,” Ikai said. “They’ve found us, and they’re going to attack soon.”

“We need to get ready,” said Albana.

“We’re going to need help,” Idana said sadly. “All the help we can get…”

“Very true,” said Ikai. “It’s time to call on our friends, to unite all Men and fight for our survival.”

“We’ll go and get them,” said Kyra.

Albana was looking at the natural world around them. “And not only Men. We need to warn Aruma and the Children of Arutan.”

“We can’t afford to lose a single moment,” said Ikai. “We’ll set off right now. We’ll meet at the New Shelter.”

“Hurry,” Idana begged them, her eyes deep-sunk with worry.

Ikai was turning over the possibilities in his mind. “We’ll take everyone through the Portals.”

“It’ll be complicated,” said Albana. “There are a lot of us, and the temples are narrow.”

“We won’t make it in time any other way. It would take us forever to reach the New Shelter on foot. The People of the Highlands and the West are too far away. It would take them months.”

“You’re right, brother. It might be difficult to organize, but it’s the only way.”

“Cross first with just a few, to show them the way,” Ikai suggested. “Then go back to the Portal to make sure they all cross over. That’s the most complicated part. Once they know the way, the first ones will guide the rest.”

“Sounds good,” Albana said. “We’ll do it like that, then,”

“By Oxatsi,” Idana put in, “don’t waste time. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Ikai looked her straight in the eye. “Idana, I know it’s a lot to ask…”

She nodded. “I’ll hold out till you get here. I won’t let them destroy the New Shelter, and the Senoca with it.”

“Thank you… I know you hate conflict and bloodshed. ”

“I’m the Leader of the Senoca in your absence. I’ll do my duty. Don’t you worry.”

Kyra smiled at her. “You get stronger by the day. Soon you’ll come to like being leader.”

Idana shook her head. “Not in the least. I hate it, all the harsh decisions make me feel sick, but we’ve been through a lot, and it teaches you to learn some courage and keep going. If I’m forced to make difficult choices, then make them I will.”

“Good for you!” Albana said.

“If the Gods arrive,” Ikai said, “keep them busy, don’t let them reach the New Shelter until we get there or else we won’t stand a chance.”

“Understood. I’ll do that. I won’t fail.”

“Good luck!” they wished her.

She smiled at them with her natural gentleness. The image began to fade, then disappeared.

A moment later Kyra was saying goodbye to her brother and Albana.

“Be very careful,” Ikai told her.

“And you too, brother,” she replied with a smile, and set off at a run.

Ikai gave a sigh of deep concern.

“Nothing’ll happen to her,” Albana reassured him. “She’s like a whirlwind. Nobody’ll be able to stop her.”

He nodded, but every time he saw his sister leave he felt it might be the last.

Albana smiled sadly. “Time to say goodbye,” she said.

He looked into her black eyes. Taking her by the waist and drawing her towards him, he kissed her whole-heartedly.

“I see you’re going to miss me,” she said, her eyes shining with joy and passion.

“Look after yourself. Come back to me safe and sound.”

She smiled at him with real amusement. “I’m always very careful,”

“I know perfectly well you’re nothing of the sort. That’s why I’m asking you. Don’t take any risks, and come back to me.”

She smiled and gave him a kiss brimming with love and passion. Without another word she winked at him and ran off towards the woods.

Ikai let out his breath in a long sigh. “The beginning of the end,” he murmured, and set off in his turn.

Chapter 27

Adamis left the temple and took cover in the shadows. They had a small boat hidden not far away at a nearby pier, and he made his way towards it. He had to dodge several patrols: not Custodians, but Soldiers of the House of Water. Sormacus was right, the army was patrolling the streets. Adamis could not remember having seen anything like this in all his years as Prince of the House of Ether.

Suddenly Ariadne's pearl vibrated again. He laid it on the palm of his hand and focused. A message came to his mind.

"The High Chamber."

"What is going on, Ariadne?"

"I cannot explain, I am in danger."

"Asu?"

"Go to the High Chamber, Adamis."

A voice sounded behind Ariadne, and reached Adamis through the pearl.

"What are you doing? Who are you communicating with?"

"No one, Lord Erre. You are mistaken."

"Yes, I am indeed mistaken. About you, you bitch!"

The sound of a blow reached Adamis.

"Ariadne! Are you all right?" he asked in alarm.

There was only silence. The communication was dead.

Adamis sighed. The risks the Children of Arutan ran were enormous. *Thank you, Ariadne. I hope this information has not cost you your life.* Unfortunately he had the feeling that it might have done just that.

It took him an eternity, and he had great difficulty in dodging the patrols and reaching the center of the Eternal City, where the giant monolith which fed Power to the city rose to the skies. Under its base: The High Chamber,

the place where the Five High Kings met and ruled the destiny of the Golden. Enveloped in a blurred mist, he came out of the water and approached the building warily. He had been forced to leave the boat because of the impossibility of avoiding the patrol in the grand canal as he approached the central monolith. He had had to use a great deal of Power in order to travel through water surrounded by the misty blurriness. At another time this would have been a source of worry, but not anymore. His days were numbered; consuming Power and shortening his life in the process was now totally unimportant.

As he came closer he saw that the entrance to the High Chamber was deserted and the great doors closed. At the same time he saw shadows moving on the upper part of the Chamber, at the foot of the Great Monolith. Without thinking twice, he used his Power. He rose in the mist until he was level with the roof of the chamber and saw three figures crouching on the crystalline surface. They were doing something with what appeared to be two discs. He approached stealthily. Suddenly a cloud moved away from the moon and the silver beams fell upon the figures. He recognized them, and a chill ran down his spine. It was Lord Erre, as he had guessed. But he had not been counting on the fact that he would be with Asu and one of his spies, one of his Shadows, as Albana had been: probably the substitute for the deceased Oskas.

Adamis froze. He could not move, or he would be seen. He took out Aruma's ring and put it on a moment before the Shadow turned in his direction, as if he knew he was there spying on them, as if he could feel him. The spy's eyes swept across where he was standing, but found only a fading mist. The Chameleon Ring had protected him. But should Asu be the one to look, he would be lost. He would not fool the Prince of Fire; he was too powerful. Adamis flattened himself on the crystalline floor without taking his eyes off his enemies' backs.

"Help me," Asu said to Erre.

The Noble turned round and followed his lord's order.

"Activate the inhibitor disc so that we can hear what they are saying."

"I do not think it will work," Lord Erre said.

"That crazy Erudite Moltus says it will work."

"All the more reason," Lord Erre replied.

“Activate it and we shall see. Sometimes that old lunatic’s attempts work.”

Erre did so. For a moment nothing happened. Then a voice reached Adamis. A voice he knew only too well: his Father’s. Instinctively he looked around in search of its source. And then he saw them. Below, inside the High Chamber, the Five High Kings formed a circle. They were not wearing formal attire, nor did they wear their crowns. They were in royal armor, and the elemental medallions shone at their necks. They were staring at each other in silence, and the atmosphere inside was charged with a tremendous tension. Adamis realized that this was no friendly meeting.

“This has gone too far,” he heard his father say angrily.

How he could hear his father when he knew with absolute certainty that the conversation was blocked and directed only to the five high kings, he had no idea, but it surely had something to do with the disc and Moltus. *Moltus… the Erudite who betrayed me. I thought he had died. But he is with Asu.* He had deserted to the enemy ranks. The vermin! Very worthy of him. The fact that Asu had Moltus’ mind to turn to was very bad news. The Erudite was a venomous snake and half-crazy, but he was brilliant, utterly brilliant. There was no knowing what technologies he might have developed for his enemy. *Problems keep growing with every step I take.* Adamis suffered a spasm and held back a cry of pain. The Shadow turned, as if he had noticed.

“Be still,” Asu snapped at his spy. “This is very important.”

The Shadow glanced around with eyes half-closed, frowning, before turning to look at what was happening below.

Adamis sighed. *That was a narrow escape.* He focused on watching what was happening below while the voices reached him through the disc. That clandestine meeting had him completely at a loss. What were the Five High Kings doing, meeting in secret behind closed doors? Were they trying to put an end to the increasing tension? *Maybe the meeting will put an end to all that talk of war,* he thought hopefully. But his Father’s voice dispelled his misunderstanding.

“Have you lost your mind?” Laino, Lord of Ether, cried in accusation to Kaitze, Lord of Air. “How dare you murder my Erudite?” As he threatened, behind the Lord of Ether’s back a mist formed, rising several feet above his

body and taking on the shape of a horrifying spirit. Such was the Power of the High King that the spirit looked like a giant bodyguard emerged from the ghost world. It was a long time since Adamis had seen his father so angry.

“I did not order the murder of your Erudite,” the Lord of Air defended himself. “Someone is trying to make the blame fall on my House.” In response to the threat, behind him and above his head black clouds formed. They reached the ceiling, threatening a powerful storm, and a bolt of lightning zigzagged inside them.

The Lord of Ether turned to the other High Kings. “If not you, then who?”

“He was the most likely one,” Kaitze said, pointing an accusing finger at Gar, Lord of Fire, who sat up erect and raised his chin provocatively.

“To accuse someone, you had better have proof,” the Lord of Fire said, and behind him a huge flame began to form like a fiery column which rose to the ceiling, consuming all the air around it and giving off a black smoke.

“So who was it, then?” Laino asked. “I will not allow such an attack on my House to remain unpunished.”

None of them replied. They were all watching each other: haughty, powerful, defiant. Their eyes were filled with power and strength. None of them would admit to any weakness.

“Nobody admits it?”

“Maybe it was done without express consent,” said Lur, Lord of Earth.

“One of the Nobles? An Heir Prince, perhaps?” suggested Edan, Lord of Water.

This time the silence became tenser. None would admit to having less than full control of their House.

“From the way hostilities are escalating,” said the Lord of Ether, “it is clear that you cannot control your own heirs and the nobles of your houses.”

“And who are you to talk about heirs being out of control?” said Gar, clearly referring to Adamis.

Laino fixed his eyes on Gar’s, and Adamis thought everything would be over there and then. His Father was about to attack the Lord of Fire. Lur

and Edan tensed as well.

Kaitze attempted to calm things down. “We are at the brink of war for exactly that reason,” he said.

“He needs to choose his words carefully! I am High King of Fire, and I am in control of my house!”

“Are you sure of that? asked the Lord of Water. “It is not what my spies tell me.”

“How dare you!” exclaimed Gar, and his flame tilted toward Edan as though it were a living creature ready to strike. Immediately an enormous waterfall, seeming to come from the sky, formed behind the Lord of Water.

“Stop, all of you!” said Kaitze. “This is going too far. The heirs of the Royal Houses and the Nobles are out of control. They will cause a war if we go on like this. They see their rival is weakening, and they want to seize their opportunity. And they will not wait for our approval for much longer. They see us hesitating in the face of events, and that cannot be allowed.”

There was a moment of enormous tension. Finally the Five appeared to regain their senses and grow calmer.

“As for your Erudite,” Kaitze went on, turning to Laino, “none of us ordered his death. It is not the satisfaction you were after, but it will have to suffice for now,”

Laino’s eyes lingered on the other four kings. He studied them, and in the end he nodded.

“I accept it, but only because all this endangers the Great Project.”

“Very true,” said Edan.

“The most important thing now for the five of us is to conclude the Great Project,” Laino said. “Do you agree? Or have you forgotten all the work we have done in order to bring this great work to success?”

The five exchanged distrustful looks, which ended in one of common agreement. They nodded.

“We have been working on this secret plan for a long time,” said Kaitze, “and we cannot let all our plans be ruined when we are so near completion. Let us sit down and make sure sanity prevails.”

The five took their places on their thrones. Adamis did not know what his father was referring to by the Great Project, and this ignorance, the fact

that he had kept that secret even from his own son, hurt him deeply. He took a deep breath and went on watching attentively. He needed to understand.

“How is the plan going?” asked Kaitze.

“My funerary temple in the great continent is ready,” said the Lord of Water.

“And mine,” said the Lord of Fire.

The remaining High Kings nodded in their turn.

“Excellent. My temple too has been finished. We already have the first part of the Great Project completed. It is time to begin the final preparations. Do we all agree?”

They all nodded.

Laino, Lord of Ether, used his Power and called out: “Let the Guardian Priests appear.”

From behind the monolith appeared seven figures in white robes with hoods that hid their faces. Their robes were embroidered in gold, and each of them carried a staff of Power in one hand and a golden book in the other. Adamis watched in awe. He had never seen anything like this before. Yet he had no doubts that they were Golden. He felt he understood what was happening less and less, which made him uneasy. What was the Secret the High Kings were keeping? Who were these strange Priests? What was the Great Project?

The Guardian Priests bowed to the Five and fell to their knees, heads bent.

“Five Guardians to watch the temples and our eternal rest,” the Lord of Ether said, and beckoned.

Five of the Priests rose and came forward. Each one came to stand before one of the High Kings.

“Have you brought it?” Laino asked.

“We have brought it, at a very high cost,” replied Gar, Lord of Fire.

The Priests bent close to their masters, and each High King handed his Eternal Priest a disc of enormous size, with an enormous golden pip inside. These discs were so big that Adamis was baffled. The Power stored in them must be huge. Why would these Priests need so much Power?

“Very well. You already know your mission.”

“To protect the eternal rest of our lords,” the priests said in unison.

“Until when?”

“Until the day of the return,” they responded, again as one.

The Lord of Ether nodded to them. “Go to the temples and see that all is prepared.”

“As the Five request, so it shall be done,” they said in unison once again, and left the chamber.

Adamis, who was growing more and more puzzled all the time, looked closely at the two remaining Priests. Each of them carried a huge book in his arms. One had a golden cover, the other silver.

“Come forward, Guardian Priest of the Book of the Sun.”

The priest knelt and presented the book to the Five.

“Come forward, Guardian Priest of the Book of the Moon.”

The other priest knelt in his turn and presented his great book.

The five rose from their thrones and went down to the Priests. They laid their hands on the books: the right on the one, the left on the other. They concentrated and used their Power. An amalgam of flashes of different colors issued from their hands. For a long moment the Power of the Five imbued the Tome of the Moon and the Tome of the Sun. Adamis knew they were placing a spell on them, as was the custom in olden times, but the Golden no longer used that old technique. *All this is very strange*, he thought as he tried to puzzle out what was happening.

“Leave now, and preserve the books as you have been instructed.”

The two priests bowed solemnly and left the hall in silence, carrying their books.

Laino gave a final summons. “Come forward, Guardian Priest of the Medallion of Shadows.”

As if emerging from the shadows themselves, another priest appeared with a large medallion round his neck. The jewel was almost as big as the Royal Medallions which the High Kings wore. He presented it to the High Kings, who repeated the process. A massive amount of Power passed across to the medallion. Adamis watched, perplexed. The High Kings could not afford such an extravagant waste of Power. Those powerful spells would

consume what little life they had left, so that they would not live to complete the cycle.

The Priest took the enchanted medallion and left.

“It is done,” Gar said, his voice and face stern, as if he were not really convinced. “And now what?” he added reluctantly.

“Now you should think seriously what you would rather have: immediate glory or immortality.”

“What do you mean?” said Gar, and the others directed questioning looks at the Lord of Ether.

“The balance between the Houses is broken. We all know that. The freeing of the Boundaries has brought it on. War is about to break out, because there are some houses which are more powerful than others at the moment. If it does, it is true that there will be glory for the winners. But they will lose the chance to gain immortality. To gain immortality we must complete the Great Project, and if there is a war we shall not be able to do so.”

“You are very sure we will gain immortality,” said Gar. “Some of us are not so confident.”

“The Eternal Chamber works, you know that as well as I do. We have several specimens of each House in hibernation. It will work.”

“You are very optimistic,” said Gar. “I have my doubts. Many things could go wrong.”

“That is true,” said Lur, Lord of Earth.

“Without risk there can be no victory,” said Edan, Lord of Water.

“We have the Funerary Temples, we have the Guardians. We have the Eternal Chamber; we only need to be awakened when we so decide.”

“That is the part I find less convincing,” said Gar.

“Time is running out for the five of us,” said Laino. “We will not see a new cycle. Our Power is running out and our body with it. We can hibernate and recover, the Eternal Chamber has proven it. You have all been in the Chamber. You have tested it. You know it works. We can come back in a millennium, rejuvenated, with some of the Power that is being drained from us. If we stay and fight amongst ourselves, we will die. It does not matter

which House comes out victorious after the war. The five of us will die consumed in it."

Edan nodded. Gar lowered his gaze.

"Someone has to wake us in a thousand years," said Lur, Lord of Earth. "And what happens if they decide not to? If we are betrayed? There is a definite risk."

"We have managed to make it work, after so much effort, time and secrets," said Laino. "Now that we are ready, is that what is worrying you?"

"I do not want to hibernate and be unable to come back," said Gar. "And neither do they."

Laino nodded heavily. "They will wake us. It has been arranged."

"Yes, but your system has never convinced me."

"It is the safest. If you tell someone from your House what we are doing, do you think they will wake you in a thousand years' time? Or do you believe they will betray you and let you die? Which is the more likely?"

Gar shook his head. "The risk of betrayal is too high. All the Nobles want to be King. No, we cannot risk sharing this secret with anyone from our own families."

"In that case, my system is more suitable," Laino said.

Gar protested under his breath. "Very well. We will follow your system. Nobody will share this with their Houses."

All nodded in agreement.

"One last thing," said the Lord of Water. "What shall we do to prevent the Nobles of our Houses starting a war?"

"We will distract them," said Laino.

"How?"

"By giving them the war they want."

"Against whom?"

"Against Men," Laino said.

Immediately Adamis felt deeply afraid for Kyra and the others. All he could think of was that he must warn her. He had to protect her. The Five High Kings left the chamber by a secret passage. He tried to calm down and think about what he had just witnessed and its consequences. His father had

planned a way to hibernate and return with his Power restored, and he was going to start a war against Men.

Asu's furious voice reached him. "Those damn senile traitors will pay for this treachery with their lives."

"My Lord," Erre said, trying to calm him.

"So they want to reign forever, eh? Hibernate and return renewed. And they have not let anybody know that they have the technology to do it. The dirty cheats. Nobody is going to rob me of what is mine by right. I am the future, my father is the past. I shall send him to his Funerary Temple so that he never returns. I shall bury him alive. Nobody betrays me. Nobody tricks me."

"Calm yourself, my Prince."

"I will be High King, that is my destiny, and I will be the only High King. The Five Houses will be mine. My dear father can go on with his secrets. But he must be senile if he really believes I will allow him to hibernate and come back to take my crown away from me. I will be King, not him."

"My Lord, that is high treason," Lord Erre warned him. "Control yourself."

"Do not worry about those decrepit old fools. Their time is over. My time has come." He motioned to them, and the three left in haste.

What Adamis had witnessed had frozen him, but these words of Asu's petrified him. *The end is near.*

Chapter 28

Idana was scanning the barrier of the Boundary from the top of a tree on the edge of the forest. The morning mist was starting to fade. The apothecary was so tense that she nearly broke the branch that held her.

Oltas pointed from the branch below. “To the North.”

“Are you sure?” she asked her Warrior Chief.

“That’s what the watch said. They should arrive soon.”

The mist vanished, and with its disappearance came a major disappointment. Crossing the Boundary which until then had served as protection there appeared an endless line of soldiers. Idana’s heart sank; they were not only soldiers, they were Gods!

“By Oxatsi!” she cried, shaking with fear.

They were marching forward in formation. More than a thousand colossal God-Warriors in full battle armor, moving in a perfectly straight line. Each was armed with a spear in one hand and a huge metallic gauntlet in the other. They were so gigantic, they trod so powerfully, that Idana knew there was nothing they could do to stop these impressive soldiers. Behind the first line appeared another, then a third, and another, then another, and still more. Idana swallowed. They were lost. They were going to be annihilated.

“The Golden Gods are sending a real army…” Oltas said, his voice faltering.

Idana’s mouth gaped wide with shock. “An army of God-Warriors…”

After the soldiers came other Gods in golden carriages pulled by coursers. They formed five squares, each made up of five hundred gods. They wore elegant dress armor on their slender bodies, and their golden faces showed the haughtiness of those who know themselves to be lords and masters.

Idana was trying to make sense of this unusual set of forces. “Five groups of carriages… five houses. They don’t mix, not even when they join forces against a common enemy…” When she realized they themselves were the enemy the Gods had come to fight, she was so overcome by terror she almost fell off the tree.

“The officers of each house?”

She shook her head several times. “Worse than that, much worse. They’re God-Lords: Nobles of great Power, with devastating skills. The Houses are sending Nobles to lead their soldiers. That can only mean they aren’t going to let anything go wrong. They’ve come to destroy us, and they want to make sure of it.”

The God-Lords radiated such invincibility that they seemed untouchable. She thought of Asu and all the evil power he was able to unleash. His nobles would not be far behind in destructive power. She shivered. There was nothing they could do against those powerful and devastating beings.

Oltas saw her lost in thought, her face twisted by fear. “What are you thinking?”

She shook her head, wide-eyed at the sight of the terrible army which was on its way. “May Igrali keep us in her glory. We’re all going to die.”

“They’re moving on without scouts, without protecting their flanks or watching their rearguard. They’re not worried.”

“They don’t need to. They fear nothing. Who’s going to be mad enough to oppose them?”

“True…”

“How long d’you think before they reach the New Shelter?”

“They’re not going very fast. They’re on foot. If they rest at night, it’ll take them about five days.”

“Five days…” she repeated desolately.

“We’d better go. We’ve seen enough.”

She nodded, and they climbed down from the tree. Thirty or so Senoca watchmen and scouts were waiting for them.

“Watch their progress and report,” Oltas ordered them. “Don’t let them capture you.”

The watchmen nodded and ran into the forest, where they disappeared into the vegetation. Idana and Oltas crossed the forest at a run. At the other end they found their horses. They mounted and galloped away.

Idana clung to her horse's neck. "We need to gain time," she said to Oltas.

"To head for the New Shelter, they'll have to go through the forest."

She shook her head. "The Nobles won't go through. It's too difficult. They'll try to go round it."

"By the eastern pass…"

"Yes, between the two great forests."

Oltas nodded. "Are you going to do it?"

She swallowed hard and heaved a deep sigh. "I have no choice, I must. For our people."

"They won't listen to reason."

"Even so, I have to try. They'd never forgive me if I didn't."

"We're with you, and we're ready. Everybody knows what's coming. We've known for years."

"They're a brave lot."

"We're the Senoca, the People of the Sea. And we're free, and we'll die free."

Urging their horses on, they headed swiftly towards their own people.

At dawn on the second day the army of Gods began to cross the pass between the eastern forests. They advanced as what they were: Gods, as if everything around belonged to them, as if nothing and nobody could stop them. And this was true enough. But the Senoca had spent a long time preparing for this moment, since they knew it would eventually come. And although fear sought to devour their brave hearts, they refused to run away. If they were to die, then die they would, but they would never give up the freedom they had gone through so much to gain without fighting.

The pass between the forests was narrow, and the God-Warriors moved along it four abreast. The bodies of those creatures were so massive that

four of them were enough to fill the wide pass. Half way, at the narrowest part, surrounded by the densest stretch of forest, the Gods stopped. Fifty or so trees had been cut down, blocking their way. Behind them Idana was waiting, with Oltas at her side and a hundred warriors behind them.

The lines of God-Warriors opened and two God-Lords came to stand at the head of their soldiers. The first was dressed in red, the second in white. They considered the obstacle and then seemed to confer, although not a sound came from them. Then they turned to look at Idana and the group with her.

Who is your leader? Let him step forward, came the mental message.

Idana's legs were shaking, but she pulled herself together and stepped forward. "I am the leader," she said.

Do you know who we are?

"Yes, I do. My name is Idana. I have been in the Eternal City."

You are one of those who escaped… In that case, slave, you know very well what you have to do. Kneel before your Gods, and you may live another day.

She took a deep breath. More than a hundred paces and a huge barricade of great trunks separated her from those heartless beings. But she knew it would not save her from their fury. Even so, she declared herself.

"This is the land of the Senoca, and it's free land. Here Men live in freedom and kneel to no one." Her voice sounded cool and self-assured, which surprised her because she was half-dead with fear.

The Golden was beside himself with anger, unable to believe this insolence. *How dare you! Kneel, slave!*

"What do you want? Why have you come?" she replied. She was holding her chin high and her stomach in so that her legs would not shake.

We have come to teach you a lesson, slave, said the other God-Lord coldly.

"And what lesson would that be?"

Whoever opposes our designs, dies, he said in a voice of ice.

"We don't want any bloodshed." she said, trying to negotiate so as to avoid the death of thousands. "Couldn't we come to an agreement?"

The two Gods glanced at each other and laughed, haughtily and disdainfully.

There will be no agreement. You have disobeyed and will now suffer the punishment. We bring death and destruction. An exemplary punishment will show everybody what happens to those who disobey their Gods.

She sighed. “You have no right. We won’t go back to being slaves. We’ll fight, and if we must die, we will.”

Of course you will die.

She nodded to Oltas. The Warrior Chief raised his hand and made a turning gesture with it. They began to fall back towards the forest, followed by a hundred of their men.

Slave, came the voice of the God in red. Idana turned. *Do not think we will forgive your insolence.* The apothecary knew what was going to happen. The God raised a finger and murmured something. There came a red flash in his hand, and all of a sudden a ball of fire formed before him. With a wave of his hand he sent it toward the group of men.

“Look out!” cried Oltas, and pushed Idana into the woods. The ball of fire traced an arch over the barricade of trees and burst on top of the group with great gusts of flame. She was thrown back and landed heavily against a tree. Dizzy and in great pain, she saw Oltas and most of the men burnt to death amid the flames.

“Bastards…” she muttered, and lay there unable to move.

The Golden sent a second ball of fire and finished off all those still standing. The two Golden laughed in satisfaction as they watched the men burning. The white-clad Golden focused. Raising his arms, he created a strong current of wind, as though it were a living creature, and hurled it at the trees of the barricade. Half of them were sent flying. The Golden was about to clear the rest when he heard a long-drawn-out whistle coming from both sides of the path. It was as though the forests were whistling a death-tune.

Both Golden turned toward the woods. Thousands of arrows flew out of the eastern forest at the columns of Golden. A moment later came thousands more from the western forest. The Gods defended themselves by raising protective spheres and activating the shields in their gauntlets. The God of the House of Fire managed to raise his sphere an instant before fifty

arrows reached him. He spun round and saw the God of the House of Air taking a step back, only to stumble and fall to the ground. He had not had time to raise his defenses, and his body was riddled with arrows from chest to head. The armor had withstood the arrows, but the ones that had struck him in the face had killed him.

No! he cried in incredulous fury. *Impossible!* The humans had killed a Golden. A noble. Unthinkable! He looked at the Warriors. Many of them had been struck. Most were only wounded, but some had fallen.

You damn treacherous vermin! he cried.

And in reply to his shout, the lethal whistling came again. Thousands of arrows rained on the army of Golden. But this time they were prepared. They protected themselves from the attack with very few casualties.

Attack the forests! the Golden ordered them.

The God-Warriors divided into two fronts and stampeded furiously into the forests on both sides of the path. Hiding among the undergrowth, thousands of Senoca sent a final volley of arrows against the charge of the Gods, who retaliated with spears and fire, ice and rock missiles. These wreaked havoc among the brave slaves. A moment later they were caught by the charge of the God-Warriors, who set about killing them mercilessly, using their Power and all the skill of their elemental weapons.

Idana managed to put the horn to her lips. With the last of her strength she called the retreat. The horn sounded three times.

“Flee…” she murmured, already drained of all her strength and in a sea of pain. Then she lost consciousness.

The Senoca fled, penetrating deeper into the woods like deer chased by predators, putting a distance between themselves and their pursuers. Strangely, the God-Warriors did not go after them but moved back to the path where the God-Lords were waiting. The Senoca ran for their lives without looking back, trying to cross the forests and reach safety at the far end.

Once the God-Warriors had assembled on the path, the Lords turned to face the forests. In their luxurious armor, forming five groups, they spread their arms wide, concentrated and murmured. Flashes – red, blue, white, brown and translucent – issued from their bodies. And a few moments later the western forest became an inferno. Firestorms formed over the whole

forest, completely covering it with black clouds which exploded with bolts of fire. A rain of fire began to fall on the trees, followed by hundreds of fiery missiles which fell through the canopy of leaves from the sky. The Senoca fled in desperation from the explosions and the flames, while a fiery rain seeped through the branches so that the vegetation was devoured by flames as they fled. Everything was scorching fire: around them, above their heads, under their feet.

The forest to the east began to be covered by ashen clouds, and the temperature dropped dramatically. Storms began to cover everything with ice and snow. In a few moments everything started to freeze: earth, trees, vegetation were soon covered with ice and frost. The Senoca ran as fast as they could, this time to avoid death by freezing.

The Lords of the House of Air drove on the storms of fire and ice which had been created by the Lords of the Houses of Fire and Water until they covered the entire forest. With the air driving them on, fire and ice spread with such speed that they reached the Senoca in their desperate flight.

The destruction was complete. The great forests died, and with them thousands of Senoca. Devoured by the flames or frozen alive as they were fleeing. Only the swiftest managed to get out of the woods alive. They ran on toward the New Shelter, where the rest of the Senoca were waiting to hear the result of the battle. They looked out at the devastating destructive power of the Gods and wept with sorrow and frustration. There was nothing they could do against those powerful beings who were the incarnation of evil. Men were doomed.

Chapter 29

It was midnight when High King Gar, the sovereign of the House of Aureb, the House of the Second Ring, came into the death chamber. He was at his secret Funerary Temple in the great continent. He was accompanied by his First Erudite, the Priest in charge of protecting the temple, and a dozen personal Guards.

Gar looked around the chamber. It was circular, and at its center was an ornate altar on which lay a sumptuous sarcophagus which dominated the whole chamber. Walls and floor were of polished red marble. The altar itself and the sarcophagus were red, like a flame. A circle of hieroglyphs carved on the polished surface of the floor surrounded the sarcophagus. He gazed at the walls and studied the Golden symbols that covered them to protect his eternal rest.

He approached the altar.

“Erudite, is everything ready for the final test?”

“Yes, your Majesty. If you will allow me.”

“Proceed,” said Gar.

A lot depended on everything going well. The Five High Kings had planned the definitive test for this evening. If the test was successful, the five of them would be able to hibernate and regain life and Power. If it failed, the temple would serve its original purpose. Gar wished with all his being that the test would be a success. He did not want to die: not yet.

“It will be a success, your Majesty,” his Erudite assured him.

“It had better be. Being so close to eternal life makes you even less willing to die. I would have resigned myself to it had there been no possibility… but now… I cannot, I simply cannot. I have to become immortal.”

“We have been working on it for over three hundred years,” the Erudite assured him. “Tonight we will achieve our goal.”

Gar nodded and with the help of his two personal guards climbed onto the sarcophagus. Very slowly he lay down inside it. He smoothed out his red silk robe and placed the medallion of fire on the center of his chest.

“We will wait for the signal from the other High Kings,” he said.

The same process was taking place in four other secret temples, where the other High Kings were preparing themselves for the final test. So it had been agreed: all of them simultaneously, on the same evening and at the same moment, so that none of them would succeed and then betray the others. High Kings they may have been, but none of them trusted even their own shadow, still less their rivals.

A moment later Gar’s medallion gave off a flash. It was followed by four others.

“The Five High Kings are ready,” he announced. “Go ahead. I want to be the first.”

The Erudite took five steps in a straight line from the head of the sarcophagus to the wall. The walls of the chamber were inscribed with runes and funerary symbols to protect the great king’s final rest, as well as to help him in the voyage and the eternal life beyond.

The Erudite went to stand in front of a large circular rune and placed his hand on its center. When he used his Power, the rune lit up with the sheen of the Golden. He pressed on it, and it yielded. A rocky panel moved sideways, revealing a dozen round openings in the wall. The Erudite inserted a disc of power in each one of them, then covered them again. The rune flashed several times at short intervals.

“The mechanism has been charged, your Highness.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

The Erudite activated the rune, making it turn on itself. There followed a metallic sound, then that of rock against rock. From the ceiling a great translucent sphere slowly came down, to halt a hand-span above Gar’s body.

“You will feel cold, my Lord.”

Gar nodded. “I am ready.”

The Erudite activated another rune on the sarcophagus, which began to fill with a viscous, semi-transparent substance. Little by little the level rose

until Gar was completely covered. His guards put on the lid of the sarcophagus, then moved back. The sphere began to spin, giving out a strange hum as it did so. On reaching the right speed, it flashed. A powerful beam of golden light issued from its lower end and imbued the sarcophagus with Power.

Gar did not know how long he had been in hibernation. The lid opened suddenly, and above his head he saw the sphere. It was no longer spinning.

He sat up, with the viscous substance dripping down his head and neck. “Has it been successful?” he asked his Erudite

“Answer your Lord,” ordered a voice which Gar recognized at once.

“Yes… yes…” the Erudite replied in a trembling voice.

Behind the scholar Gar saw Asu, wearing heavy battle armor. With him were Iradu and thirty or so soldiers who filled the chamber. Gar’s two guards lay dead on the floor. The Priest had been forced to leave the chamber.

“What does this mean, Asu?” Gar demanded.

“I was going to ask you the same thing, Father. What does all this mean?” He waved at the sphere and the sarcophagus.

Gar got to his feet slowly in the sarcophagus. The substance was still dripping off him. He was surrounded by soldiers.

“I am the High King of the House of Aureb. I do not owe explanations to anybody, least of all to my own son.”

“Let me guess, then. You were trying the new technology of hibernation you have been developing in secret. Now I understand why you were so interested in building this place. And here I was thinking you were obsessed with the approaching end of your days. When what you were building was this chamber, to trick death and come back revived and recovered. To come back and take my kingdom away from me. My right.”

“As long as I live, the right is mine, not yours.”

“And what was the plan? For the Five to pretend they were retiring to their eternal rest in their funerary temples, and instead of dying, becoming rejuvenated? It is a good plan, I cannot deny that, but it is very inconvenient for me.”

Gar was surprised that Asu should know all this.

“Whatever I decide to do is my prerogative as High King. I have nothing to explain.”

Asu made a face. “You see, Father … the time when that was true is past. Just like your own time and that of your reign.”

“How dare you speak like that!”

“How dare you conspire with the other High Kings behind the back of your own heir, of your own house? To develop technology with them for your own personal benefit?”

Gar jabbed his finger at him. “Be very careful with what you say and insinuate! I am not prepared to tolerate any more insolence!”

At the gesture, Asu’s soldiers lit their fiery swords and activated the shields on their arms.

Gar gaped at them in amazement. “Lower your weapons immediately! I am your King! You owe your loyalty to me! To me and not to him!”

But the soldiers did not heed their king’s order.

“You see, Father, they are now loyal to me, not you. I know that for someone as archaic as you are this is hard to understand, but allow me to explain. I am the future and you are the past, a past that is about to disappear forever, and they are betting on the future. I cannot blame them.”

“This is treason. Have you gone out of your mind?”

“Me?” Asu shook his head. “Who is experimenting with secret technology so as to live and reign eternally? Who is making deals with the enemy?”

“Think carefully about what you are doing, Asu. I am within my rights, I am the High King of my House. You owe me respect and obedience. Whatever course my actions or decisions may take. Without either doubting or judging.”

“You have taught me to trust nobody, to be stronger than everybody else. You have made me who I am.”

“I am your Father, your King. You must obey my command.”

“I am sorry, dear Father, I have obeyed you all my life. From now on I shall only obey myself.”

“Think it over. There is still time. I will forget this has happened. I will forgive you this error in judgment.”

Asu laughed. “My dear Father, you have never forgiven anybody for anything in your long existence. And you are not going to begin now. You will not let me ruin your precious plans now that I know what they are.”

“You have always been a stupid, vain young man, but I never imagined you would go so far as this.”

“Your words hurt me, Father,” Asu said with a theatrical gesture, as if he had been stabbed in the heart. Then he grinned broadly. “Luckily I have been immune to your spite for a long time.”

“Lower your weapons!” Gar ordered.

The Soldiers kept their eyes fixed on him. They did not obey.

He clenched his fists and stared at them. “I will order you one last time: lower your weapons and take my son prisoner, or else you will all die here today.”

“Take me prisoner? Why would they do that? You do not understand, you decrepit old man, you are the past. A new era is beginning, an era in which the House of Fire will rule supreme. I will rule over all the Houses, over all the Golden.”

“You are insane!”

“No, Father, I am a visionary.”

“Do not do it, Asu, I am your father!”

“Kill him!”

At Asu’s order the thirty soldiers hurled themselves on Gar. Instantly the High King waved his hand and raised two spheres to protect himself: the first one of fire, the second of solid lava. The first soldiers attacked his defenses with their fiery swords. Gar spun round and launched a wave of fire which spread out from his body to the walls of the chamber. The attack caught the soldiers who were nearest. Some managed to defend themselves with their shields while several others fell dead, consumed by the wave of flames. The soldiers furthest away leapt to avoid being hit.

Iradu was about to intervene, but Asu stopped him. The Prince raised a protective sphere and gestured to his Champion to do the same. Iradu, a natural warrior, was not pleased with the order. He had devoted his life to training for moments like this. Protecting himself and waiting was not what he wished for, least of all when his men were dying. He would have

preferred to attack, but Asu would not let him. The wave passed over them, but their protective spheres held.

Gar, on top of the altar, his arms stretched out wide and his eyes like burning coals, surrounded by his flaming spheres, was the personification of a god of fire.

“You will all die for this treachery!” he shouted.

The Soldiers used their Power to create an explosion on the ground and propel themselves to the high dome of the chamber. From that height they sent fiery spears and javelins against Gar’s defenses. The High King felt the impacts, but his defenses held. In reply he sent a huge ball of fire, which burst against the soldiers before him. They fell to the floor amid flames, their soldier shields insufficient against the King’s power. The soldiers beside and behind Gar leapt on him. They stabbed the protective spheres with their fiery swords, striking them again and again with all their might, trying to destroy his protection. Turning to face the attack at his back, Gar waved his arms and formed a colossal fiery bird. The soldiers hurled balls and missiles of fire at the enormous shadow, but it was immune to fire. Gar laughed, and his smile was full of satisfaction. He gave the order, and the bird flew at the soldiers. On contact it burst into a mass of flames. The soldiers were reduced to ashes.

“All together, attack!” Asu shouted.

The attacks on Gar multiplied, but the High King sent much of his reserves of Power to reinforce the spheres, and the soldiers could not penetrate them, either with physical blows or with the use of their own Power of Fire. Gar raised his arms to the ceiling and brought them down as he intoned the words of a spell. The floor of the chamber became the crater of an erupting volcano. Asu reinforced his own sphere and passed some of his own Power to reinforce Iradu’s. The soldiers kept battering at the King’s defenses with all their strength and Power. Gar raised his arms and sent Power to the volcano. A moment later it erupted with a tremendous explosion.

The soldiers were consumed by the eruption. When it was over, only Gar, Asu and Iradu remained standing.

Gar looked at Asu with utter disdain. “Did you really think they could overcome me? I am not as decrepit as you might think.”

Asu smiled. “I knew they would not. That was not their purpose. Iradu, it is your turn.”

The Champion nodded and leapt on Gar. The impulse and speed left a wake of fire behind him. Iradu’s sword came down on the spheres and a flame burst out from the impact. The strength of the attack was such that Gar was forced to take half a step back into the sarcophagus. At once he sent more Power to strengthen his spheres. Iradu battered them with his sword of fire and shield, without pause, with all the force of his huge body. With every attack Gar’s defenses weakened more and more, and he was beginning to feel the blows on his weak and shriveled body.

“It hurts, does it not, Father? Your ancient body will not stand up to the punishment.”

“Iradu, I am your Lord, not him! You are the Champion of my House, my Champion!”

Iradu stopped his attack. He looked at his King. Then he turned to look at Asu.

“I am sorry, your Majesty. He is more powerful. Abdicate now and I will protect your life.”

“Abdicate? In his favor?”

“I promise you will not die. I will protect you with my life,”

The High King fixed his eyes on his son’s. He recognized in them an unfathomable greed, a disproportionate ambition, which bordered on insanity.

He bent his head. “I cannot do that. He will destroy us all.”

Iradu sighed. He looked at Asu and the Prince nodded. The Champion lifted his sword of fire and brought it down.

The High King closed his eyes and concentrated. While Iradu attacked ceaselessly with sword and shield and sent fiery missiles and balls of fire against the spheres, Gar used practically all his remaining reserves of power to conjure an ally. Before Iradu there rose a Fire Elemental.

“Beware!” Asu warned him.

Iradu turned toward the being of fire. It had a slightly humanoid shape, thin and over six feet tall. Its whole body was burning, face, body and limbs; it was a living flame. The creature struck Iradu with its fiery arm,

and the Champion covered himself with his shield. The flames licked his face. He took a step back. The Elemental moved toward him at amazing speed. He threw himself into the attack.

Asu smiled ironically at his father. “Alone at last.”

Gar shook his head. “You are insane.”

“Just like you. Otherwise, why do you wish to live forever? Have you not lived and reigned enough already? Nearly a thousand years, Well, I think you have, but of course you do not. Which of us is the insane one here?”

“Would you have respected Iradu’s offer?”

Asu glanced at his Champion, who was fighting furiously against the Fire Elemental.

“No. I would have killed you both. I would be sorry about Iradu, but it is not my fault if he has a weakness which I cannot allow. I cannot leave loose ends. What I am planning is too important.”

Gar shook his bent head. “To crown yourself High King of all the Golden.”

“Exactly, Father,”

“You will never succeed. You are insane.”

“We shall see,” Asu said, and joined his palms before him. A red flash ran through his whole body. A ray of fire issued from his hands and attacked Gar’s spheres. He kept up the fiery beam and increased its intensity little by little, trying to penetrate the spheres at one single spot.

Gar reacted. On the verge of consuming his last reserves of Power, he invoked a great storm of fire. The sky of the chamber vanished behind clouds black as smoke, with thunder and lightning beginning to form inside them. Asu looked up with a superior smile and sent more Power to his protective sphere. The storm broke with a tremendous roar, and heavy fire began to rain down over the whole chamber. Burning lightning zigzagged down to attack Asu and Iradu. Without losing control the Prince kept up the beam, strengthening his sphere against his Father’s fire at the same time. His defense held, unlike that of Iradu, who could barely manage to defend himself from the storm and the Elemental. He was holding his shield over his head and deflecting the Spirit’s blows with his sword.

“Your spheres are not holding,” Asu said to his father. “They are about to fall.”

“They will hold,” Gar said furiously.

“I am afraid not, my dear Father. Your reserves of Power are empty. That was the purpose of the attacks. To leave you without any Power.”

“I disown you!”

And with this last cry of rage, his protective spheres cracked. Asu’s fiery beam penetrated them and struck the High King in the chest. It pierced him from chest to back. Gar, his eyes staring wide, moaned in pain, raised his hands to his chest and fell to his knees inside the sarcophagus.

“I… I curse you…” he said, and with a last cry of rage, he died on his knees, on top of the sarcophagus.

Asu turned to Iradu, who was on the floor, badly wounded. Half his body was burnt from the Fire Elemental’s attacks. The creature was on top of the defeated Champion, its arms raised for the coup de grâce. Asu was about to attack when the creature was consumed before his eyes. Without its creator it could no longer exist.

“Priest!” Asu called.

The Priest came into the chamber and bowed.

“Prepare him for the final journey.”

“As you wish, your Highness.”

“You will watch over him for all eternity. Nobody must disturb his rest.”

The Priest nodded. “Of course. That is my mission. No one will disturb him.”

Asu laughed in satisfaction, and his laughter echoed against the walls of the chamber. And as he laughed in great guffaws, his communication disc flashed. When he picked it up and activated it, it projected an image to his right. Blurred at first, it became clearer very quickly. A chamber very similar to the one he was in took shape. The floor was covered with dead Golden soldiers. In the center, inside a sarcophagus on top of a brown altar, lay another of the Five High Kings: dead.

“Here is proof,” a voice said.

Asu’s eyes gleamed in triumph. He used his Power on the disc and sent the same image in return: that of his father inside the sarcophagus, dead.

“Here is proof,” he said with deep satisfaction.

The disc flashed again, then went out.

A moment later it flashed again. He smiled broadly. The image that appeared might have been a copy of what they had just seen. He half-closed his eyes to make sure it was indeed another image. This floor too was covered with dead Golden soldiers, and on the royal sarcophagus, on top of a white altar, lay another of the Five Kings: dead.

“Here is proof,” another voice said.

Asu clenched his fist hard in a sign of victory and power. He sent back the image of his dead father.

“Here is proof,” he said, and put away the disc. Filled with uncontrollable joy, he yelled as if he had lost his reason. But no, he had not lost it; nothing could be further from the truth. He had succeeded in the first part of his plan for absolute domination. Three of the High Kings had been betrayed by their heirs and had died in their underground chambers, and now his destiny was just a single step away.

“It will all be mine!” he cried, raising one fist with the Claw injecting the life from a disc into his wrist. “Mine!”

Chapter 30

There was a lump in Ikai's throat as he gazed at Idana, lying on the bed badly wounded. Two Senoca apothecaries and a medicine-woman of the People of the Highlands were tending to her. She was writhing in pain from the severe burns she had sustained. One of the survivors of her group had found her alive. They were doing all they could to prevent her suffering, but it was an impossible task.

"Ikai…" she called out.

One of the apothecaries motioned him to come close, and he knelt beside her.

"I'm here, Idana," he said, and stroked her cheek.

"You came…" she said with a grimace of joy, though half her face and head were burnt.

"I told you I'd come with reinforcements."

"They've come? Did you persuade them to fight beside us?"

He nodded. "They're outside. They've come to fight with us. And Kyra will come soon with the People of the Steppes, and after her Albana with the People of the Trees. Even the men and women of the People of the West, the ones who'd been locked up in the pods, even they're going to come. They are all joining the Senoca."

"Oh… I'd like so much to see that… all united…"

"You will," he said, and kissed her forehead.

"Did… did I do well?"

"Well? You did something wonderful!"

"Did I?" she said, and writhed in pain.

"Everybody's saying so. Idana: the slave who confronted the army of Gods. Idana, who faced the Gods and didn't bend the knee. Who showed

the courage in the hearts of Men, who didn’t give in. Who didn’t surrender her people’s freedom. Everybody’s saying it. Everybody’s cheering you.”

“But so many have died… did I do the right thing?”

He nodded firmly. “You did what was right. I couldn’t have done it any better myself. You tried to negotiate, then when there was no other option you fought. It was the right thing.”

“Thank you…”

“And there’s more. You killed a God-Lord and several hundred God-Warriors. Nobody has ever done anything like that before. And the news is spreading all over, from race to race. They’re all talking about it, and it fills them with hope. Because it means that the Gods can die at the hands of men. And that discovery gives them wings to rise up and fight. And they owe all that to you. To the Apothecary who stood up to the Gods.”

She tried to smile, but the pain returned and her face contracted.

“Besides, you managed to gain time for us. The army of the Gods stopped when they crossed the forests, and it hasn’t moved in two days. It seems their Lords need to rest so as to recover the Power spent.”

“Then I did it.”

“Yes, you did, and you gained us the time we needed so that everybody could get here.”

“Promise me you’ll show them to me,” she said, with a grimace of pain.

“Show who, Idana?”

“The other Peoples of Men. I’d so love to see them…”

“I promise.”

His eyes filled with tears, Ikai left the tent. Lurama, matriarch of the People of the Highlands, and Burdin, their Warrior Chief, were waiting for him, wrapped in their typical bear-skins. Thirty thousand Warriors were camped behind them.

“How is she?” Lurama asked.

“Not well…”

“I’m sorry…”

He dried the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his tunic. “She’s a great woman.”

“She must be, to stand up to the Gods,” Burdin said, “to have managed to kill them.” He looked pleasantly surprised.

“I’d like to thank you for answering my call.”

Lurama nodded. “I told you that when the day came you could count on the People of the Highlands, and we always honor our word.”

“We told you we’d come, and here we are,” Burdin said. “We have a blood debt with you. You gave us our freedom, and we haven’t forgotten that.”

“Thank you anyway. It’s going to be very hard. Many won’t make it.”

“It is the price that has to be paid for freedom,” Lurama said, “and we’ll gladly pay it. They’ll never take it away from us again.”

“We’ll fight to the end,” Burdin said.

Ikai hugged Lurama and then Burdin. “Thank you, my friends. I’m truly grateful.”

“The People of the Highlands are with the Senoca,” Lurama assured him.

Ikai nodded, deeply gratified. He raised his eyes and searched for the Senoca, who were camped further down, near the houses above the New Shelter sea. They were getting ready to defend their homes.

Two scouts approached to report the latest news. Then they left at a run towards the northern forests.

“What’s the news?” Lurama asked.

“The Gods are on the move.”

She looked up at the sky. “Do we have time?”

“Yes. Our people are on their way. They’ll be here before sunset.”

“Good. Let’s get ready.”

With the evening sky beginning to give way to a full moon, Ikai went back into Idana’s tent. He looked enquiringly at the people caring for her. The eldest, sad-eyed, shook her head slowly. He understood. It was the end for Idana. He had to take a moment to ready himself. He was on the verge

of tears, and there was such a lump in his throat that he could not swallow. He felt as if someone had pierced his chest with a spear. He took several deep breaths and managed to turn a little calmer. Bracing himself, he went across to his friend.

“Idana …”

The apothecary opened her eyes just a slit.

“They’re here. D’you want to see them?”

She opened her eyes fully and nodded. She was so weak she could not even speak. He gathered her up in his arms, surprised at how light she felt. They came out of the tent to an orange sky, with the full moon seeming to welcome them.

“Look, Idana, they’re here,” he said with the girl’s head leaning on his chest.

She looked out at the sea in the background. Seeing the houses of the New Shelter she smiled. Then she looked to her right and saw the Senoca, her beloved people. Those survivors who were still able to fight were lined up there, armed with bows and spears. There was determination in their pose; they would never yield. Beside them she saw a people she did not know. They were dressed in bearskins and looked like fierce warriors. There were thousands of them, lined up beside the Senoca.

“These are the People of the Highlands,” Ikai explained. “I asked them to come and help us, and they’ve come.”

She smiled and looked up at him with hope in her heart.

“They’re not all here, they’re still arriving, and they’ll keep coming all night and tomorrow. Thousands will come to help us.”

Then he pointed to the left, where Kyra had just arrived with the first forces of the People of the Steppes. She had brought thousands of warriors on their piebald horses.

“It’s Kyra!”

When the redhead saw them she jumped off her horse and ran to meet them. At the sight of Idana and her brother’s face, she realized what was happening. She glanced covertly at her brother, and he shook his head without letting Idana notice.

Kyra swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Hi there, Freckles, I’m back,” she said, trying hard to hold back her tears. She hugged her gently and kissed her forehead. “What d’you think of all the mounted warriors I’ve brought with me, huh?”

Idana’s eyes were wide with wonder. “Their skin’s red…”

“The People of the Steppes have red skins and learn to ride horses before they learn to walk.”

“Fascinating…”

“But you still haven’t seen the best,” Ikai said, and turned with her in his arms so that she could see Albana assembling the People of the Trees. Thousands of men with green skin in loincloths, armed with bows and knives, making a human forest on the grass of the plains.

She was open-mouthed. “It’s… it’s unbelievable…”

Kyra waved to Albana, and the brunette hurried to them. There was no need for anybody to tell her what was going on. When she saw Ikai and Kyra’s faces, and the state Idana was in, she knew at once.

“Hi there, Apothecary!” she said with a smile. “I hear you taught those stuck-up Gods a lesson, so now you’re not only a Hero of the Senoca, but a Hero to all Men.”

Idana smiled faintly.

“There’s talk of building a statue of you beside the Monolith,” Kyra put in, keeping up Albana’s joke.

The Apothecary smiled at her two friends and her eyes shone.

Still holding her firmly, Ikai nudged her gently with his shoulder, “And here they come: the survivors of the People of the West.”

Under the brightness of the full moon the five races of Men made up an immense human wall in front of the New Shelter. Thousands of men and women of the five peoples were waiting, their eyes on the four friends.

“There you have it,” Ikai said proudly. “All Men united as one, ready to face the Gods. Just as we said would happen in the council, that evening years ago.”

“I never…thought we’d do it…” Idana muttered.

“They’ve all come. Thousands of men and women. They’ve come to fight for freedom, for Men. We’ll win, Idana, I promise you. For them, for all of us, for you.”

She looked at each of them in turn. “Will you promise me that?”

“We promise,” they said.

Idana’s gaze passed over the five peoples of Men, and she smiled. A wide smile, full of hope.

“We’ll win,” she said, and sighed. Kyra and Albana embraced her. She closed her eyes and died.

Her eyes filled with tears, Kyra turned to the five peoples. She pressed her communication bracelet and announced:

“My friend Idana has died! A Hero! The Apothecary who faced the Gods and refused to give in, who fought against them! The woman who killed a God-Lord! She gave her life for our freedom! Remember her sacrifice, remember what she achieved, remember that she never surrendered her freedom!” Her voice seemed to come forth in five different languages at the same time, which amplified its strength. For a moment there was silence, and she did not know whether they had understood her. Even so, she cried out again at the top of her voice:

“For Idana! For freedom!”

A moment later thousands of voices shouted in unison, in five different languages:

“For Idana! For freedom!”

“Death to the Gods!” Kyra cried, raising her clenched fists to the sky.

“Death!” they all shouted in response, and raised their fists in the air.

They said farewell to Idana at dawn in a simple ceremony, following the Senoca tradition. They placed her in a small funerary boat and sent her to the arms of Mother Sea Oxatsi. The singing of the Senoca filled the harbor, bidding farewell to one of their own, to a hero.

At the end of the ceremony a commotion at the other end of the harbor reached them. Fearing the worst, they ran to see what it could be. From the far end of the harbor, a huge ship was approaching the quayside. It was a

ship of the Gods! The scouts gave the alarm and the Senoca hastened to their posts in the fishermen's huts so as to confront the threat. Ikai, Kyra and Albana armed themselves and hid behind one of the Senoca fishing boats.

The ship reached the pier and dropped anchor at ten paces. They tensed. Ikai poked his head out to see why the Gods were not disembarking. A message reached his mind.

You had better tell your people not to attack…

The voice sounded familiar to Ikai, but he could not place it.

You would not want this old witch of nature to be riddled with arrows by accident, would you?

"Aruma!"

Yes, your people know me by that name.

He emerged into the open and signaled to the houses. "Stop! They're friends! Nobody attack!" Kyra and Albana came out too and sent messages to prevent the remaining troops from rushing to the harbor. It was some time before Aruma thought the situation was sufficiently under control. She came ashore in a small boat, accompanied by half a dozen Golden. All of them wore green and brown robes, under a hooded cloak of the same colors. In a forest they would pass completely unnoticed.

When they set foot on the pier, there came a whispering murmur of concern and fear among the Senoca who were watching, bows in hands.

They do not like the Golden, Aruma said, spreading her arms wide to hug Ikai.

He returned the hug with affection, "And do you blame them?" he asked with an ironic smile.

Of course not, young tiger, she replied and turned to hug Albana and then Kyra.

And how is the young tigress? she asked Kyra with almost sisterly affection.

"Surely not as well as the great witch of nature," she replied, and they both laughed like old friends.

"Have you heard anything from Adamis?" Kyra went on to ask.

Aruma nodded. *He is well.* She took her aside and in a low voice told her everything that was happening in the Eternal City. When she finished, Kyra's face was deeply worried.

"Thank you for telling me," she said, and turned to Ikai with a look that said *we need to talk.*

After the hugs, and seeing there was no danger, the Senoca relaxed. Ikai turned to them and reassured them, just in case.

"These Golden are friends, they are here to fight with us. No harm must come to them."

Thank you. This old witch is grateful.

"And this ship?"

I bring reinforcements. The Children of Arutan have come with me.

"How many?" Kyra asked excitedly.

All those I could summon. Almost a hundred.

"Will they fight with us? Against their own?" Albana sounded doubtful.

Aruma nodded solemnly. *This is our fight as well.*

"And we thank you from the bottom of our hearts," Ikai said.

And I thank you in turn.

"Now then. We have a lot to discuss and plan, and very little time."

Very well. But one thing more, my young lion…"

"Yes, Aruma? Whatever you need."

I have brought you a gift. One of my "concoctions".

Ikai stared at her in surprise. "A concoction?"

I have spent much time preparing for this day. she said. There was a touch of malice in her broad smile. *About five hundred years. I always hoped that one day Men would rise against the Golden. My concoction will help you. You will need to bring carts down to the cargo ship (s*he pointed to a second, heavier, ship which was coming into the bay at that moment) *and unload the barrels of the concoction. There are several hundred of them.*

"As you say," said Ikai. He did not understand why, but knowing the old witch's eccentricities, he preferred not to know.

It was almost nightfall when the great meeting took place in the Council House, where the Senoca decided tribal matters. Ikai presided, with Kyra and Albana on his right, representing the Senoca. On his left was Aruma, representing the Children of Arutan. Around the great oak table were the leaders of the other four nations: Lurama and Burdin for the People of the Highlands, Lone Wolf and Swift Deer for the People of the Steppes, Ilia and Pilap for the People of the Trees, and Galdar for the People of the West.

“We don’t have very much time,” Ikai began, “so I’ll leave formalities aside. The Army of the Golden is on its way here. They’ll arrive tomorrow evening.” There were restless murmurings. “They’re coming to destroy us. You’ve already seen this, and you know it in your hearts.”

They have been ordered to give an exemplary punishment, Aruma said. *The Five High Kings have ordered it so. That is what my people in Alantres have told me.*

“They’ll have no mercy on us,” said Kyra.

“We’ll fight together, and we’ll win,” Ikai told them.

“What plans have you made?” Lurama asked. “Your ideas have always led us to victory.”

Ikai sighed deeply. “This time things are much more complicated.”

“We trust you,” Kyra said.

“And we follow Kyra,” Swift Deer added.

“We’ll fight all together, under Ikai’s leadership,” Albana said.

“Wherever Albana goes,” said Ilia, “the People of the Trees will go with her.”

Men, together with the Children of Arutan, will face an army of Golden, Aruma said, with an ominous gesture. *The balance is tilted very much in their favor.* There was a murmur of disapproval at this. *I do not set out to make enemies, but this old witch has lived more than a thousand years and although she never believed the day would come when Men would free themselves and rise against the Gods, she also does not believe it may be possible to defeat the Golden army… not without a brilliant plan,* she concluded when the complaints turned louder. *On the other hand, as I said,*

I never thought this day would arrive, and I was wrong. I might be mistaken and we might have a chance.

"One chance is all we need," Kyra said. "We'll take it and win."

"The problem is the God-Lords," Albana commented. "A God-Warrior can kill dozens of our people, but a God-Lord can exterminate thousands."

"Very true," Ikai agreed. "Although numbers are on our side by a hundred to one, they aren't a determining factor in this battle, because an even greater one is the destructive power of the Gods."

Let us come up with some strategies that will work," Aruma said.

The group stayed in the Hall well into the night, proposing and studying options for the battle. They analyzed all the proposals and possible outcomes until they were forced to stop. Finally they went to bed. All except Ikai and Aruma.

Do not let disappointment get the better of you, Aruma said.

"I try not to, but I can't find a way to avoid dying tomorrow."

Do not give up. You have come very far. Freedom is at hand.

"Thank you, Aruma."

I have one last idea to suggest, one I am sure you will take advantage of, and then I will leave.

Ikai felt a sudden disappointment. "You're leaving?"

Yes. I am needed in Alantres. The situation there is critical.

"But we need you here! Your Power is enormous!"

But it is a Power which my own people need in the Eternal City.

"We won't be able to win without you."

Yes, you will, I am leaving my children with you, and my gift. Use them well. I know that you will do just that.

The old witch, Leader of the Children of Arutan, whispered something in his ear, then left.

He was left perplexed and desolate. "May Oxatsi take pity on our souls!"

Chapter 31

Stunned, Adamis watched the attack on the Fifth Ring from the doorway of the temple where he had been hiding.

“It is not possible, it cannot be happening,” he said to Sormacus.

There were explosions of Fire and Earth all along the inner side of the great ring. Shades of red and brown lit the whole area. The noise was deafening. Meanwhile the defenders of the House of Water were raising huge defensive walls of ice and water. Water was able to overcome the destructive power of Fire, but not that of Earth.

Sormacus’s shoulders sagged. He sighed heavily. “I am afraid it is. The Houses of Fire and Earth are attacking. It is war.”

Adamis was unable to take in what his eyes were seeing. “But how is it possible? The High Kings would never allow this madness. There has never been a war under their rule. They have always avoided it.”

“The rumors that have reached me are that the High Kings are no longer in control of certain Houses.”

“That is impossible!” And yet as he said this, he began to realize what was happening.

“Asu?”

“That is what my sources say.”

The sky above their heads darkened. Fierce flashes in red and brown appeared in a threatening sky. A hundred storms of fire and rock broke out, and death began to rain from the sky on to the city of Water.

Adamis was still staring at the destruction around him. “A regicide?”

“Worse than that, my reports say at least two: Fire and Earth.”

“Preposterous!” Adamis was trying to interpret Sormacus’s information and the attack he was witnessing with his own eyes, but his brain refused to

accept it. Finally he came to terms with it. “If that is true, and the Princes now rule their houses, then war, death and destruction await us.”

The defenders were raising hundreds of enormous domes of solid ice round the entire Ring to protect the citizens from storms and enemy attacks. The elemental walls and domes held off the battering, but they would not be able to do so indefinitely.

Sormacus half-closed his eyes. “I got that from my informants. I need more information, but the situation is now so chaotic that I doubt our people can get hold of any more. I fear Asu’s agents might be murdering them as we speak.”

Groups of God-Warriors of the House of Water were running to the docks and the areas under attack. They were followed by the Lords, who were surrounded by Custodians. While they went to battle, a multitude of Golden of the lower castes were fleeing from the front lines. There were explosions of fire and rock everywhere. The ground rose, the air burned and death reached the Golden of Water.

Adamis sighed. “I cannot believe Asu has gone as far as this. He has always been a lunatic, but a regicide? War between the Houses? It is unthinkable madness, even for him.”

Sormacus nodded. “This is what we feared would happen one day. Death and destruction as we have never known before. Our leaders had already predicted it. It is the beginning of the end of the Golden.”

A tremendous explosion brought down a building near them, and they were forced to run for cover.

The Golden of the House of Water directed colossal storms and missiles of ice at the attacking troops. Thousands of icy explosions froze the ships which were being used to launch some of the offensive.

“The House of Water is counter-attacking,” Adamis said.

“I do not think they can keep up their defense for long. Look…”

A thousand ships with sails of the Houses of Fire and Earth were approaching, ready to assault the Ring. At the same time, from the docks, hundreds of Lords were launching storms and missiles which destroyed the House of Water’s front lines of defense.

Adamis felt the ground under his feet begin to buckle and crack. “Spheres!” he cried.

“We can’t stay here, we’re too close to the docks,” Sormacus said, and no sooner had he raised his sphere than he felt the impact of a huge rock from an explosion nearby.

Adamis was scanning the water. “They are launching rocks and balls of fire from the other Ring. They are preparing the invasion. They are going to destroy the whole area.”

The buildings in the first line of the Ring, those further in and closer to the water, were beginning to crumble under the Power of fire and rock. The Golden of the House of Water were screaming. Death was falling on them, and they had no escape-route.

A terrible sense of frustration took hold of Adamis. “I cannot remain idle. I have to do something,” he said.

“Leave the city. Seek safety.”

The winter storms broke above the attacking ships which were preparing to assault the rings, freezing the God-Warriors who manned them. The Lords of Fire sent fiery storms to fight those of ice, while the Lords of Earth used their Power to attack the troops of the Golden of Water on the docks of the Fifth Ring. The House of Water defended itself by creating great tsunamis to sink the enemy ships.

“Thank you, Sormacus. But I cannot do that. I must try to stop this madness.”

Sormacus gestured at the burning pier where the God-Warriors of the House of Fire were beginning to land. “It is too late.”

“I will try to reach my father. He will be able to help us. There must be some way of stopping this.”

“I wish there were, but I do not think so, my Lord. Your father will most likely be under attack already. I do not think he will survive. He is on the losing side…”

“Even so, I have to try to stop this catastrophe. And you: what are you going to do?”

“I will contact the Wise and carry out their designs as I have always done.”

The explosions of fire and rock multiplied. The ground was soon unstable under the tremors the attackers were causing. Adamis and

Sormacus could hardly stay upright. Buildings were collapsing all around them.

“I understand. In case we never see each other again… I am grateful for everything you have done for me.”

“It has been an honor.”

The two Golden hugged each other like brothers in a lost cause, and parted with the feeling that they would never meet again.

Adamis strengthened his sphere and broke into a run, with everything around him exploding in fire and rock. He saw fifty or so Lords of the House of Fire landing at the main dock, which had already been taken by at least a thousand Warriors. A little to the west the scene was being replayed, but this time by the troops of the House of Earth. The combined destructive power of both Houses was devastating. The troops of the House of Water were falling back toward the Royal Castle.

A sense of something ominous came over him. “Where are you, Father? Why do you not come to help your ally?”

Chapter 32

And so the fatal moment arrived for Men. The majestic army sent by the Gods to kill them crossed the northern forests and began its final advance towards the New Shelter. Between the army of Golden and the coast, where the homes of the Senoca stood, lay a great plain covered with short grass. At the end of it, with their homes and the sea behind them, waited three hundred thousand free men, armed and ready to fight to the death to keep their freedom.

The Golden advanced with a heavy tread, five thousand God-Warriors – a thousand for each House – leading the way in their spotless armor. They gleamed under the rays of the early evening sun with the unmistakable light of victory. They advanced without any trace of fear, chins held high, backs straight, and the looks of Gods. They radiated an aura of power and invincibility that caused hearts to shrink. The men of the five nations knew that these beings were on their way to destroy them and the New Shelter. The Gods would have no mercy and would destroy everything. When the Golden army was a thousand paces from the horde of men, it stopped.

Ikai was watching from the center of the front line. At his order the army of Men started to prepare. Burdin was at his side. The warrior of the Highlands put a hand on his shoulder.

“Today we’re going to kill Gods,” he said with such confidence that Ikai nodded in agreement. His eyes turned to the thousands of men and women of the Highlands at his back and he felt protected. But he knew this was a false feeling; nothing would protect him from the devastating Power of the Golden.

“If…”

“Don’t worry, Liberator, I’ll protect you. Lurama would never forgive me if anything happened to you.”

Ikai smiled at the great warrior, and hugged him gratefully. The two hundred thousand men and women who flooded the plain shifted restlessly, holding their weapons in sweating hands. Hardly anyone was in armor, very few had shields. Most carried bows and arrows, with long knives at their belts of leather or cord. They looked like a great horde of farmers, without order or direction, in clear contrast to the disciplined, perfectly supplied and well-organized army of the Golden.

From the rear of the enemy lines appeared the Lords in their golden carriages, who came to stand at the front of the lines of God-Warriors. Ikai could make out five distinct groups: presumably one for each of the five Houses. They were standing apart, and by the colors of their clothing he could recognize which house each group belonged to. Five carriages moved forward several hundred paces: one for each House.

“What do those bastards think they’re doing?” Burdin asked.

“They want to parley.”

“We ought to kill them instead.”

Ikai smiled at him. “First we ought to find out what they want.”

“And then kill them.”

“And then kill them,” Ikai agreed. At this there was joy on the faces around him.

“I’ll go alone,” he said to Burdin.

“No way.”

“I can protect myself, but not you.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m coming with you. And that’s that.”

Ikai shook his head and reluctantly accepted. He walked three hundred paces and stopped. Burdin was one step behind him. The mental message reached him like a blow.

Are you the leader of this rabble? demanded the Lord of the House of Fire.

“Yes. My name is Ikai.”

The Lords exchanged looks of surprise.

You are wanted. You escaped from Alantres.

“Well, here I am.”

And where are the other fugitives?

Ikai shrugged.

That attitude will not help you. He gestured behind Ikai. *Neither you nor those slaves.*

Ikai did not flinch at this. “What do you want?” he asked.

You are insolent, and insolence is payable in blood.

“I don’t fear you. I’ve already fought one Lord of the House of Fire. And I’m still alive. On the other hand, he isn’t.”

The golden face of the God turned to one of rage and incredulity.

That is not possible!

“Nor was reaching the Eternal City, or saving one of the Chosen, or escaping from there, or freeing a Boundary, or freeing all Men…would you like me to go on?”

I shall roast you alive for this!

Ikai did not flinch. He locked his gaze on that of the Golden. “Your proposal?”

The God could not manage to subdue his feelings, and was making a supreme effort not to attack him. The Golden on his right, from the House of Ether, spoke in his place.

The proposal is that you all turn yourselves in now. Without resistance. The punishment will be relative to the crime committed. It will clearly be exemplary, but many will live to serve again. If you refuse, you will be obliterated. No one will survive. Those are the orders we received from the High Kings before we left. We have to see that they are carried out.

“I will tell my people.”

Make them consider it. To fight us is a folly that will cost all your lives. You, more than anybody, know the destructive power we possess. You have seen it. You know it. Make them think carefully. There are hundreds of thousands of men who are about to die. It is a confrontation which they cannot possibly win.

Ikai said nothing, but turned on his heels and left. Burdin placed himself at his back to protect him with his own body. He went to stand before the expectant tide of his people, ignoring the Golden, who were watching him

from afar. He activated the communication bracelet and addressed the five peoples.

“Listen to me!” he shouted, and there was absolute silence. “I bring a proposal from the Gods. They want us to surrender. They say that if we do so the punishment will be dire, but that many will survive to serve again as slaves,” A murmur of protest began, and instantly turned into loud refusals. Ikai gestured for calm and went on: “If you refuse… you’ll be destroyed. Nobody will survive. They’ll obliterate us.” He wanted to make this very clear, so that everyone would know what they were facing.

A sepulchral silence followed his words. The fear was patent on the faces of many. The shining enemy army was before them, an army of all-powerful Gods.

Again a murmur began among the sea of men and women, a murmur which became stronger little by little. It turned into a shout, with fists raised.

“We won’t turn ourselves in!”

“We’re free men! We’ll never go back to being slaves!”

“We’ll fight!”

“We’ll die as free fighters!”

The shouts became deafening: thousands of throats calling out that they would not give up, that they would fight. Ikai listened to them, his heart filled with pride. Against all odds, with destiny itself against them, facing an impossible task, knowing they would die: even so, they would not surrender.

“What’s your answer?” he shouted at the top of his voice. “Fight or surrender?”

“*Fight*!” three hundred thousand throats thundered in unison. The sound was so great that earth and sky seemed to shake.

Ikai turned toward the Golden, who were watching. He spread his arms wide and with a wave indicated the men and women who with their arms raised were still shouting whole-heartedly to the sky.

The message from the Lord of Ether reached him.

I am sorry it has to end like this, said the Lord of Ether.

“They prefer death to being slaves,” Ikai said into his bracelet. “The proposal is rejected. We won’t surrender. We’ll fight.”

Sorry? said the Lord of Fire. *If what they want is death, death is what they shall have! And we appreciate your bringing all the slaves.* He smiled triumphantly. *You are saving us the trouble of hunting and killing them.*

“We’ll see at the end of the day who dies and who lives.”

The Lords began to mobilize themselves. Ikai joined the People of the Highlands and unsheathed his sword. He raised it to the sky, then with his other hand he picked up Idana’s horn and made it ring out in a single long call. It was the signal for all to prepare themselves. With orderly movements the sea of rebels divided into three large groups, with Ikai in the central one, just as they had planned. The lines of God-Warriors did not move, while the God-Lords advanced in their carriages to join their leaders and formed themselves into five groups in front of their lines. Ikai counted two hundred and fifty nobles: fifty for each House. A shiver ran down his spine. Their combined destructive power would be terrifying.

“What are they doing?” Burdin asked.

“They don’t want to waste time. The Lords are going to destroy us from afar by using their Power.”

“Cowards! Let them come and fight hand to hand, like a true warrior!”

Ikai shook his head. “They won’t get their hands dirty with our blood. For them it would be demeaning. They just want to kill us as quickly as they can, as cleanly and easily as possible, so they can go back to their Eternal City.”

“The swine!”

The God-Lords wasted no time in beginning to use their Power. They were so powerful that their auras started to radiate with an intense gold which became visible to all. The rebels watched in silence. The wind vanished from the plain, and with it first birds, then a moment later all the other animals. A grim silence fell on the battlefield. Everyone knew what it meant. Surrounded by that golden radiance and in the midst of that ill-omened silence, the Golden seemed true Gods. Murderous Gods.

The golden radiance began to change. In the Lords of the House of Fire it turned red, brown in those of the House of Earth, blue in the House of Water, white in the House of Air and translucent in the House of Ether. Five

Golden Houses, five Elemental Powers that would bring death to Men. And destruction descended upon them. The three groups of rebels watched the sky blackening. Murderous storms formed over their heads as fear began to take over their bodies. Rays of fire and zigzagging bolts were followed by deafening rolls of thunder. A hurricane wind struck the front lines. Men and women were hurled through the air. Colossal tornadoes appeared out of thin air in the center of the plain and came toward them. The winds they created sucked in everything around them.

Fire began to rain from the heavens over Ikai and his group in the center. A winter storm broke out over the group to his left, freezing everything it touched. Under the group on his right the ground began to tremble with the onset of an earthquake that would swallow them up. A mist that would devour the souls of whoever it came in contact with began to surround the three groups, blocking their way. There was no means of escape; they were being attacked from the sky, the earth and the air, and beyond. Panic spread among the rebels, who were about to be utterly annihilated.

Ikai gave two long calls on the horn. In reply, the Children of Arutan rose from among the Men. They had stayed crouching, hidden, so as not to be detected. They were scattered throughout the groups, covering the greatest area possible. They raised their arms to the sky and used their Power. A beam of brown-green light issued from their arms, rose and widened to form a great dome which came down to the ground. A hundred of these domes appeared, covering the rebels in the three groups.

“Everybody get inside the protective domes!” shouted Ikai.

The storm of fire fell on them. It reached those who had not run under cover in time, who burned amid screams of horror as flames devoured their lives. But the fiery storm could not pierce the domes. The rain of fire and fiery bolts fell relentlessly on the men, but was unable to penetrate. The icy storm fell on the first group, but met the domes and found its way blocked. The third group saw the earthquake fade away beneath their feet within the protection offered by the domes. The ring of deadly mist hurled itself against the rebels it surrounded. Ikai and Burdin had to step back and seek cover under one of the domes. Those unfortunates who had not managed to get under cover were devoured by the deadly mist.

The God-Lords stared at the domes in surprise. This was something they had not been expecting. But they took action and attacked more intensely,

determined to break this defense. They launched huge fireballs which burst on impact and created scorching flames, fiery meteorites that rushed down from the heavens to crash against the domes with devastating impacts of rock and fire. The icy storm produced a rain of sharp stakes of ice which fell on to the domes, while at the same time the temperature dropped vertiginously so that the grass was soon covered with frost. The men huddled together inside the domes. Those who found there was no room for them were frozen alive. The tornadoes crashed against the defenses, seeking to break them and suck out the men and women they were protecting.

Anxiously, Ikai watched the monstrous creations of the Lords. He knew that with each attack the domes were weakening and the Children of Arutan were having to send more of their Power to strengthen them. But seeing the tremendous battering they were receiving, he guessed they would not last for long. Either they would be destroyed, or else their Golden allies would run out of Power before long. It was time to act, or else they would all be lost. He put the horn to his lips and sounded it three times. The fear and chaos which were assailing the rebels huddling under the domes vanished at the sound of the horn. Those who carried bows readied them and aimed at the God-Lords.

One of the defensive domes gave in. Hundreds of men, together with the Child of Arutan who was maintaining it, died in flames. Ikai cursed silently. With a lethal whistling that filled his soul with hope, a hundred thousand arrows left the domes and sped through the air to fall upon the God-Lords. He followed their flight, holding his breath. An instant after impact, the Lords covered themselves and their carriages with solid spheres. The arrows hit the spheres with a metallic rattle and were unable to pierce them.

Ikai sighed deeply.

“The bastards are covering themselves!” cried Burdin.

“We already expected that.”

“What do we do now?”

“We use Aruma’s gift.”

“The God-Witch?”

“Yes. We need to have faith.”

“I don’t believe it’ll help us. She’s one of them. You shouldn’t trust her.”

“I trust her.”

Without losing his calm, Ikai repeated the call. This time the archers put their hands to their waists, where they carried flasks of leather and wood. Inside was Aruma's concoction. Behind Ikai, in the middle of each group, the rebels opened Aruma's barrels. They dipped their arrows in the contents as the storms intensified above them. Another of the domes gave way before the impact of one of the tornadoes. Five hundred rebels were sucked out by the devastating force of its winds and died.

The rebels released their bows, and another hundred thousand arrows flew from inside the domes and fell on the God-Lords. Many were caught in the storms and failed to reach their goal, but even so, many thousands reached their target. The God-Lords saw them coming. But they felt no fear behind their defenses and ignored them, focusing instead on killing the rebels.

And the unthinkable happened!

The arrows pierced the defensive domes of the Golden. With muffled moans of surprise and horror, the God-Lords were struck by the arrows. Horses and Lords fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Before the stunned stare of the God-Warriors, their Lords died riddled with arrows.

"It's working!" Ikai cried gleefully. "Aruma's concoction works!"

The Men had killed God-Lords! There was hope!

"I'll never speak ill of that old witch again!" Burdin said, and sank his sword in the barrel of the strange silvery substance. Ikai did the same with his own, together with his knife. Then he turned to his people and shouted: "Keep launching! Don't stop!"

Another of the domes gave way and several thousand rebels froze alive, turned into statues of ice. The rebels launched another volley of silver arrows. The Lords strengthened their defenses, sending more Power to their solid spheres, and raised new ones around the existing ones to protect them from the attacks of Power. With defenses raised against both physical attacks and attacks by Power, nothing could touch them. But the God-Lords were wrong. The arrows reached them and once more penetrated the spheres to reach their targets. They fell amid screams of pain and rage, their slender golden bodies riddled by dozens of arrows. They died with terror and fathomless incredulity on their faces.

Ikai seized the opportunity. “Launch again! Quick! Come on!”

The arrows flew once more. But the surviving God-Lords fled, at the same time ordering the God-Warriors to attack and cover their retreat. The arrows reached the front lines of the Warriors, who were already running forward. The arrows struck their huge bodies, but they did not stop. Only those who were hit in the face, or else with many arrows, fell. The remainder charged, elemental lance in one hand, shield-gauntlet in the other.

Shouts of terror made Ikai look to his right. Another of the domes was falling. The ground was opening under a thousand men in an earthquake which was creating abysses, and into these the rebels were falling amid horrifying screams.

“Hell! We’ve got to finish off the Lords, or else their storms will wipe us out.”

Burdin pointed up at the sky. “The storms are getting less.” Where there had been ten before, now there was only one.

“When those who created them died, the storms died with them,” Ikai said. “But there are still enough to devastate us. Our allies aren’t going to hold out for much longer.” He indicated the nearest Child of Arutan, who was trying to keep up the protective dome at all costs.

Burdin gestured toward the God-Warriors, who were charging at incredible speed, sliding on cloaks of fire or ice. “They’re coming!”

“Get ready for the assault!” Ikai shouted as a new wave of arrows flew toward the attacking army in a short arc. This time they reached the front lines of the God-Warriors full on, causing many casualties. But they were already on top of the rebels.

The impact was awesome.

The Warriors struck the lines with such brutal strength that men and women were thrown into the air like rag dolls. The domes could not defend them from physical attacks, so the God-Warriors penetrated them and began to slaughter the rebels.

The second wave of God-Warriors reached them and leapt over their comrades, who were hacking at the front lines. They advanced in gigantic leaps, propelled by their elemental power to unthinkable heights, and fell in the midst of the Men. When they touched down they used their Power to

cushion their fall, in the process creating an elemental explosion all around them. One landed near Burdin and everything around him burst into flames, killing a hundred rebels.

“Damn you!” Burdin yelled, and went for him.

God-Warriors of the House of Water attacked the group on the left, falling on them with explosions of ice as they touched the ground. The rebels around them froze to death or were pierced by missiles of solid ice produced by the explosions.

“Move away from them when they come down!” Ikai cried desperately. The Golden were falling from the heights like Gods of death on the mass of rebels, who were unable to move far enough away to be safe from the explosions.

The God-Warriors landed on the group to the right amid showers of pure rock, so that the rebels were crushed by stones and boulders. Chaos took over the men, who were being slaughtered.

While the remaining God-Warriors spread chaos among the rebels, the surviving God-Lords summoned a hundred of the Warriors for protection and retreated to the far end of the plain, near the edge of the northern forests where they had come from. Only one out of every ten had survived. They were regrouping, utterly baffled, trying to understand what could have happened.

Ikai saw the chance he had been waiting for, seized the horn and sounded it five times. At his signal, on the edge of the eastern forests there appeared fifty thousand warriors, approaching at full gallop on their piebald mounts.

“Go, Kyra!” he encouraged his sister from afar. This part of the plan was vital.

At the head of the charge rode Kyra, with Lone Wolf on her right and Swift Deer on her left. The remaining chiefs of the tribes of the People of the Steppes rode behind at the head of their warriors.

“For freedom!” she shouted.

“Death to the Gods!” shouted Lone Wolf.

When the God-Lords saw this new threat aimed directly at them, they sent a thousand God-Warriors to form a barrier to block its way.

“Today they’ll answer before the spirits of the prairies for their crimes!” shouted Swift Deer.

The braves of the steppes howled, yelled and shouted at the spirits with insane abandon as the thunder of thousands of hooves echoed across the plain like an earthquake.

The God-Lords fell back to the forests of the north to avoid facing the charge. They would kill the savages from a distance. They would not put themselves within shooting range of arrows or spears, least of all from a cavalry charge like that. As the riders neared the lines of God-Warriors, the latter began to launch elemental missiles against the advance. Javelins of ice and tridents of fire struck the forefront, driving off not only the riders of the front line but also several behind them. They were followed by devastating balls of fire and ice which exploded on impact into flames and shards of cutting ice.

Kyra urged her horse on. “Bastards!” she yelled.

Hurricane winds struck to her left, carrying several riders away through the air. She was forced to hold on to her horse with all her might so as not to fly off herself. Swift Deer nearly went with them. Ghosts of Ether reached the horses and attacked them so that the poor animals died of terror, bringing their riders down with them. A missile in the form of a huge rock brushed Lone Wolf’s head, and he shifted to one side to avoid it. The boulder fell further back and broke into hundreds of fragments, killing both riders and horses.

“Keep going! We’re there!” Kyra shouted, fifty paces from the enemy line.

The God-Warriors dug in their legs, raised shields and spears and formed a wall of elemental shields. An unmovable wall: they used their Power and part of the wall turned solid as rock: part ice wall, part barrier of fire, part a wall of winds.

The crash was horrendous.

Thousands of horses struck the wall with the full momentum of their charge as their riders released arrows and spears at the God-Warriors. There was a deafening noise, followed by terror. Horses and riders were thrown in the air by the brutal impact. Some were thrown back, unable to take evasive

action, others were sent flying over the wall of God-Warriors and fell behind them, mostly already dead.

The golden wall withstood the first blows. Thousands fell trying to get over it. But a few did manage to have some effect and break it at several points. Kyra was one of those. Making use of her Power, she disarmed two God-Warriors and sent them flying backwards.

“Follow me!” she cried to her people when she saw the opening. Lone Wolf, Swift Deer and a hundred or so braves made their way through it. A little to their right another hundred warriors managed to penetrate the wall and kill a few Gods. The fight was now frantic.

Seeing the line breaking, the God-Lords got ready to act against Kyra and those others who had managed to get through. At the edge of the forest, behind the Lords, a pair of eyes was watching them. The Lord Leader of the House of Ether became aware of this and turned to face those eyes which were watching him closely. Then another pair of eyes appeared beside the first, and then another pair, and yet another. A moment later a thousand more had appeared. The whole edge of the forest was filled with eyes; even the branches of the trees were full of them. Eyes that were staring at him with a single purpose: to kill him. And at that moment, the Golden Lord realized something was wrong. Deeply wrong. The first pair of eyes stepped forward out of the vegetation and appeared in front of the Golden.

It was Albana.

She raised her black daggers and cried: “Death to the Golden!”

There came a prolonged whistle from the forest. The God-Lords turned toward Albana at the same moment thousands of arrows flew from the forest. They strengthened their spheres with horror and panic on their faces. They had no time for anything else, for the arrows smeared with Aruma’s concoction penetrated their defenses and riddled them. They died with their eyes wide with disbelief.

Albana came to the side of the Lord Leader of the House of Ether, who had fallen from his carriage and lay writhing on the ground. The Golden stared wide-eyed at Albana.

“We never believed… it is impossible… you are no more than slaves…” he muttered, and died.

In the midst of the battle, the God-Warriors were unaware of what had happened behind them. Albana gave the order and fifty thousand warriors of the People of the Trees emerged, yelling like demons, from the forest where they had been hiding, to attack the rearguard of the God-Warriors: A thousand of them had to confront a hundred thousand rebels attacking them on two fronts.

Kyra fought like a demi-goddess at the head of the braves of the steppes. With the help of Lone Wolf and Swift Deer, she had killed several of the imposing God-Warriors and was preparing to face a giant from the House of Fire.

“I’m going to send you back to your lords,” she said.

Condescendingly and haughtily, the huge God-Warrior smiled.

Never, you slave, he said, and with a movement of his spear of fire he hurled a fiery javelin toward her. She sent Power to her translucent sphere. She was finding it easier and easier to use her Power; by now it was almost instinctive. The javelin struck the sphere and she felt the shock, but it failed to penetrate. The eyes of the Golden widened in surprise.

“Who are you calling a slave, Golden? I’m a free woman.”

The face of the God-Warrior hardened. *I do not know what you are. You have Power, but I am going to kill you all the same,* he said, and launched a ball of fire at her with a flick of his shield.

Kyra concentrated. She could not let it explode or else it would reach Lone Wolf and Swift Deer, who were beside her fighting another God-Warrior, stabbing him mercilessly with their weapons which had been soaked in Aruma’s concoction. Lone Wolf was concentrating on his torso while Swift Deer worked on his back. Another half-dozen warriors of the prairies were hanging from the enormous Golden’s legs and neck. She reached out her hand and focused on stopping the ball of fire. She had never tried anything like this, but if she did not manage to do something at once her friends would die. The missile reached her, but it was losing speed. A fraction of a second before it touched her sphere, it stopped. It stayed there hovering, spinning, before her eyes. “Gotcha!” She moved her hand and sent the ball back toward the God.

You wretched slave! the God-Warrior roared, and the ball exploded on top of him, together with several of his comrades. The Warrior had

managed to protect himself with his shield, but his fellow warriors, taken by surprise, fell amid flames. The Braves of the Steppes hastened to finish them off.

“Did you like the taste of your own medicine? I have a lot more for you!”

No… it is not possible… only the most powerful among us can do… a thing like that.

“In that case I must be one of the most powerful,” Kyra said. She caught the Golden’s aura, focused on it, fixed it and lifted the giant by the neck. She held him suspended in midair.

It cannot be… you are a slave… he said. He was bleeding from the mouth.

“I can see you aren’t listening.”

The God-Warrior moved his fiery spear and attacked her with a bolt, but her sphere held. She raised the palm of her hand and froze the bolt, extinguishing it.

It is impossible… you are using the Power of Ether and of Water at the same time.

In fact Kyra herself had been surprised by this. She had just wanted to put out the fire. She did not know where the ice had come from. But she did not let on.

“Surprised by what a woman can do?” she said, and with a wave of her arm she sent an ice stake against the Golden. It pierced his chest from side to side.

Nooo….

“I told you I was a free woman. You should have listened to me.” She watched him die and let him fall to the ground. She did not know how she had managed it all, but it was getting easier for her all the time. And her Power was increasing.

She turned to the wall of God-Warriors, with the braves of the steppes dying against it. *I have to help them*, she thought, and went forward, hurling God-Warriors through the air, to break the wall.

Albana was leading the Green Men in the rearguard, with Ilia and her brother Pilap beside her. A God-Warrior of the House of Air blocked their

way. He waved his spear and sent a zigzagging bolt of lightning against Albana, who used her disc and covered herself with a protective sphere. In response the God-Warrior sent a strong gust of wind which sent Ilia and Pilap flying. They landed violently about twenty paces away, but the sphere protected Albana.

Surprised to see that she had not been affected, the God-Warrior leapt into the sky amid a gust of wind. From above, he attacked her with an orb charged with the force of an electric storm. She saw it, emitting electric charges as it came, and moved away with a shadowy leap. The God saw her vanish into darkness and then reappear twenty paces further away. The orb exploded against the ground, electrocuting a dozen warriors of the Trees.

Albana swore silently. She could not rise above the ground and stay high above like the God-Warriors, but what she could do was make them come down so that they lost the advantage of height. She concentrated and used her Power before the Golden could attack again. With a muffled *snap*, a whip of intense black issued from her arm and wrapped itself around the ankle of the hovering God. With a tremendous tug she brought him crashing to the ground.

The God-Warrior rose to his feet, shaken by the blow, and she seized her opportunity. She gave another shadowy leap and appeared behind the Warrior, who was already recovering. With a simultaneous movement she drove her two daggers into each side of his thick neck. The Golden gave a grunt and attacked her with a gust of wind produced by his shield. She was hurled backwards and hit the ground hard. The impact left her breathless. The Golden took two steps toward her with the daggers buried in his neck. He stumbled and fell to his knees. She got to her feet, trying to get her breath back. The God-Warrior grunted again and fell face down on the grass, dead.

She recovered her daggers and ran to where Ilia and Pilap had fallen. They were bruised but alive. Ilia gestured to her right, where a God-Warrior was butchering a group of her rebels. She used her dark whip, and this time it coiled itself around the Golden's neck. With a pull of her Power she made him fall backwards.

"Finish him off!" she ordered her people. Instantly Pilap and a dozen green-skinned warriors jumped onto the God and stabbed him to death.

“All at once! Attack all together!” she said, and turned to face the next God-Warrior with Ilia at her side.

Chapter 33

Adamis adjusted his war helmet. It was golden, as befitted a Lord. It covered his whole head, hiding his face behind a wide mirror visor in which a flame burned. The helmet visors of each house reflected the element they belonged to and hid the identity of the wearer. He was dressed in the armor of a Lord of the House of Fire, whom he had been forced to kill. The Lord and his escort had discovered him as he was crossing from the third to the second ring. Luckily the accident had occurred in a little-guarded area and he had not been found out. He needed to take every possible precaution; he was alone and in the lion's den. Were he to be challenged again, he would not live to tell the tale.

Feigning a confidence he did not feel, he walked over to the command post in the main dock of the second ring. His intention was to reach the first ring, and his father, but the bridges between the fifth and fourth rings and the second and first had been destroyed. To arrive by sea was impossible, since the enemy ships were rigidly blocking the access. He had looked for a portal to travel through, but it had proved useless. The portals were all taken and closely-watched.

He watched the frantic activity taking place along the whole ring. The House of Fire was alive with activity: troops and support personnel went from one end to the other in an incessant movement of Golden and Enforcers. The noise of the battle was growing progressively stronger as he headed to the inner side of the ring. He put his hand to his eyes and tried to make out his home, the first ring, in the distance, but a thick mist around it prevented any clear view of the buildings. What he was able to notice were numerous red flashes and explosions in the mist, which told him that the House of Fire was attacking the First Ring.

At the doors of the command post a giant warrior turned to the forces lined up on the docks. "Fire!" he ordered.

Adamis counted more than three thousand Warriors and fifty Lords deployed in that part of the ring. Countless Enforcers accompanied them, executing their masters' orders. The Lords were sending devastating storms of fire and blazing missiles toward the First Ring. He calculated they would reach the docks and the first rows of buildings, but no further. The Power did not reach across such distances. To attack the inner ring and his Father's royal palace they would have to land, either through a portal or by ship. Using the Portals was very dangerous in these circumstances, as the enemy would be expecting them on the other side. It made more sense to cross the canal that separated the two rings. The scene of the attack on the House of Water came to his mind.

He went a little closer and his suspicions were confirmed. A thousand ships filled with Warriors and Enforcers and led by Lords were heading toward the First Ring. They were currently halfway between the two rings. He was saddened to see that they were attacking the docks and the front row of buildings of the Ring of the House of Ether with elemental explosions. And if that were not serious enough, what he saw next left him breathless. Further to the east, three thousand ships from the House of Air had taken their positions. They were attacking the First Ring, supporting the House of Fire's offensive.

Adamis took a deep breath. He felt a terrible unease. Now he understood. *That is why he cannot go to help the House of Water. He is being attacked by the Houses of Air and Fire.* The situation was far more serious than he had imagined. An alliance between the Houses of Fire and Earth was deeply worrying, but with the addition of the House of Air it would be impossible to stop them. The Houses of Water and Ether found themselves in a clearly weaker position, and because they were both being attacked at the same time they could not help each other. A pang in his stomach forced him to double up. He straightened up immediately; he would be found out if he did not behave like a Lord of the House of Fire. He had to make an effort to keep back the sickness he felt.

"Give them no breathing space!" shouted the Warrior in command. A hundred paces away, Adamis recognized him and stopped. He had not done so before because his face was hidden under the war helmet he wore: silver, as was appropriate for Warriors. But there was no doubt about it: it was Iradu, Asu's Champion, the one who in time of war was responsible for

leading the army of the House of Fire. Adamis saw that the giant champion's body was marked by huge burn marks. Something had happened to him which had almost cost him his life.

He shivered involuntarily at the horror and destruction before his eyes. Asu had planned and executed his coup with masterly skill. Adamis had to admit that Asu was proving to be far more intelligent than he had ever thought he could be. He knew his rival was reckless to the point of insanity, but he never imagined that in his delirium of grandeur he would dare go so far. Unfortunately he had. Golden and Men would suffer a fate of horror and death.

Thinking about Men, he turned toward the catacombs, which were in the inner part of the city, a long way from the docks. They would be keeping the slaves there. He could imagine them, utterly terrified, unable to understand what was happening. When the troops landed, the horror would reach them and they would be unable to hide from destruction and death. Unfortunately it would reach them all. They would be the victims in this fratricidal war: the war between the Gods.

The combined attack upon the House of Ether intensified. Adamis was trying to find a way to reach the First Ring, but without success. A Lord in war armor arrived at the command post. Adamis came as close as he dared without raising the attention of the hundred Warriors on watch duty around the post. At first he did not recognize the Lord. He used Notaplo's bracelet to intercept the communication.

Iradu greeted Asu's cousin respectfully. "Lord Erre."

"Champion of the House of Fire," replied Lord Erre with equal respect.

"What are my Lord's orders?

"The High King wishes to intensify the attack on the House of Ether."

"And the battle on the House of Water?"

"It is won. It is just a matter of a little more time. The forces of our allies from the House of Earth have surrounded the Royal Palace. Without the help of the House of Ether they will not survive. That is why it is crucial to increase the pressure on them."

"I understand. So it shall be done, when they are on the point of falling. The High King and his people will flee through the Royal Portal to the Palace of the High King of Ether. We will not be able to capture them."

“That does not matter. Even though they hide in the House of Ether, they are doomed. Once the Royal Palace of Water is overthrown the army of the House of Earth will join ours and that of Air in the First Ring, and we will finish them off.”

“Very well. I will give the order to intensify the attacks.”

“I will join the invasion force. Clear the way for me. We must make them retreat deep into the city.”

“Do not worry, they will,” Iradu said confidently.

“And one thing more … High King Asu wants to know whether the plan is ready.”

“It is. I will carry out his order personally.”

“It is essential that you do not fail. The stakes are high.”

“I have never failed at anything, my Lord. I will not fail today.”

“Very well.”

Lord Erre gestured, and his personal bodyguard joined him. At the docks he boarded an impressive warship which was waiting for him.

“Destroy the defenses!” Iradu ordered the attacking forces.

The last ships were leaving to invade the First Ring. Adamis saw several Lords boarding smaller, more graceful vessels. These were the assault troops, He searched for one without a Lord in command and found it at the end of the dock.

“Lord on deck!” the officer said, surprised to see Adamis coming on board.

“I am taking command,” Adamis said confidently.

“Of course, my Lord,” said the officer. He moved aside so that Adamis could stand astern in the center.

“Follow the assault forces.”

“At your command, my Lord,” the officer said, and signaled to the helmsman.

At the point half-way between the two rings the battle was at its thickest. The warships of the House of Fire were attacking the coast with blasts of fire which generated intense flares whose aim was to destroy the House of Ether’s defenses. But the thick fog did not allow them to see whether they

were being successful or not. Several heavy ships, loaded with Warriors, Enforcers and a few Lords, had penetrated the waters of the First Ring on their way to the main docks to finish the job of destruction. Suddenly a giant gray-black silhouette emerged from the water. It had no definite shape. Giant eyes of horror were all that could be distinguished. The spirit, of monstrous proportions, hurled itself at the ships like some creature of nightmare. Adamis knew perfectly well what it was, and what it entailed. His Father's Lords had combined their Power to create a giant Voracious Spirit, devourer of life.

The ships of the House of Fire sank amid cries of horror from those swallowed by the spirit. From the ships at the rear came an attack on the creation of Ether with fiery spheres, arrows and spears. But the Spirit, though wounded, was attacking even more voraciously. It went on devouring Golden and Enforcers, destroying the enemy ships. Adamis was encouraging it from deep within himself, while at the same time his ship moved away from the monster so as not to capsize. From land the House of Fire increased the attack on the area the monster had emerged from. Adamis hoped that the Lords of his House had managed to get to safety, but knowing the destructive power of fire he feared the worst.

At the same time he noticed something that raised his spirits. The House of Ether was fighting off the invasion. New Voracious Spirits appeared and fell on the ships. They were accompanied by a deathly fog which spread from the shore. The ships which penetrated it reached the shore with all their crew members dead. The poison of the fog finished off the Golden. The few ships that reached the shore intact were received by a horde of spirits of agony. The creatures fell on the Warriors of the House of Fire and devoured them. Adamis could not have been more proud of his people's masterly defense.

But not all was good news. Although the ships of the House of Fire were losing the battle, things were different with those of the House of Air. In the paths of the ships the Lords had created a number of typhoons which headed toward the coast, destroying everything they found in their way, both on sea and on land. The spirits were dispersed by hurricane winds. The deathly fog was dispersed by great gusts of wind created by the Lords. And what was even worse, on dry land the first line of ships were beginning to create great tornadoes which cleared the landing areas and forced the army

of Ether to fall back. Adamis swore under his breath. Ether's natural enemy was Air. It could defeat the other elements, but as for Air…

The ships of the House of Fire began to pull back while they waited for those of the House of Air to clear a path. The battle went on until nightfall, when the troops of the House of Ether were finally forced back to the royal castle. Adamis had left the ship by now. Surrounded by warriors of the House of Fire, he watched his home being destroyed. The lower part of the mountain, scattered with translucent crystalline buildings, which formed the first ring, was being razed to the ground by countless whirlwinds, tornadoes and hurricane-force winds which were toppling buildings and Golden alike and making their way to the upper levels. Amid protective flames the great army of Fire was landing, and soon that of Air would follow. His detachment began to take a higher position and was fiercely attacked by the retreating defenders.

The fog now covered only the higher part of the First Ring, where the royal castle and his family were. The invading troops secured the lower areas, then fell back awaiting orders. The troops of the House of Air took up a forward position, forming the first line of attack and defense, half-way up the great mountain. They were protecting the troops of the House of Fire from the attacks of the House of Ether, which fell on them from the summit. During the whole night reinforcements continued to arrive from both Houses. The attacks on the summit did not cease. Relentlessly they battered the walled positions under the covering of the fog so as to pave the way for the assault which would come with dawn.

Adamis, with an ever-growing knot in his stomach, could not see how they could possibly get out of their quandary. And when dawn arrived, his faint shred of hope vanished completely. The navy of the House of Earth arrived victorious and joined that of the House of Fire at the docks. This meant that the House of Water had fallen. And now the House of Ether would fall too. Three massive ships docked, and from them issued the three regicide Princes. The first was Asu, unmistakable in his showy red and gold war armor. He was followed by Lurra of the House of Earth. Last came Aize, of the House of Air. They made their way to a fortified command post before the intent gaze of all, followed by their guards of honor. They marched like all-powerful peacocks: erect, chins held high, showing off all their power and glory.

Very carefully, Adamis went closer. He was surrounded by about a hundred elite warriors of the House of Fire. He activated the bracelet, although he hardly needed to. Asu was so sure of his victory that he did not even take the precaution of hiding his conversation.

“Victory is ours!” he said. He was staring up at the top of the city, which was being bombarded with elemental explosions.

“They are not even counter-attacking,” Aize commented.

“They are preparing for the final defense,” said Lurra. “The same thing happened in the siege of the High King of Water’s palace.”

“And see how it served them,” Asu said, and guffawed with laughter. “Nobody can stop us, we are the future of the Golden.”

“The High King of Water, most of his Lords and some of his forces have fled through the Royal Portal,” Lurra said.

“Do you think they have taken refuge up there?” Aize asked.

“Without a doubt,” Asu replied. “Those two shriveled old mummies will want to fight and defend their thrones together, to the end. They will not give in. But do not worry, we will grant them their wish. We will kill them together.”

Aize’s eyes turned to his troops. “If they have taken shelter up there, it will complicate our assault.”

“That conceited Laino thinks he will be able to resist on his precious crystal mountain, the fool!” Asu said arrogantly. “He has no idea how mistaken he is. Nobody resists my plans.”

“He does not want us to reach the Great Central Monolith,” Lurra commented. “He is denying us its Power.”

“I have sent several patrols to the monolith through the four passes,” Aize said.

“And?” Asu demanded.

“They have not come back.”

Asu was plainly upset at this answer. “The old lunatic is planning something.”

“Who cares?” said Aize. “He will soon be dead.”

“We must not underestimate those old mummies,” Lurra said, sounding doubtful. “They have stayed alive for so long because they are intelligent.”

Asu swept his gaze over the troops. “Whatever he may be planning, he will not be able to stop us. Nothing can do that now. When all our forces have finished landing and preparing, we will attack.”

They nodded.

“Follow my orders, and we will win. Everything is going according to plan. The victory is within our reach. Do what I say, and we will be the three sole High Kings.”

“I am with you,” said Lurra.

“And I,” said Aize.

“Now let us prepare the final attack,” Asu said breezily.

A few hours later there came strong explosions, followed by the sound of tumbling rocks.

“What the hell is going on?” snapped Asu.

“The passes to the Monolith have been sealed, my Lord,” came Iradu´s reply. He had already disembarked.

“Laino is planning something.”

Accompanied by their Champions and their escort of elite warriors, Aize and Lurra hurried to the command post.

“What on earth …?” Aize demanded.

“Better not stop to find out,” Lurra said.

Asu clenched his fist tightly. “Attack the damned mountain. Do not leave a stone standing in the royal castle.”

“And what about the two High Kings?”

“Give the order to kill them. Whoever brings me their heads, I will overwhelm him with riches. Pass the word to the troops.”

They left at once. The army of Air made its way up through the crystal buildings, which were already no more than rubble. They were followed by the army of Earth, with the army of Fire bringing up the third line. They made up three concentric rings surrounding the mountain, on whose summit the survivors of the Houses of Ether and Water had taken shelter.

As the three invading houses ascended, they pounded the summit with explosions and missiles. From below, the Lords sent elemental storms to the summit to make the soldiers' way easier. Adamis created a storm of fire of very low intensity and sent it to the summit. Asu's guard of honor was nearby, and he had to act like a Lord of Fire. Seeing his enemy so close, he thought for a moment of killing that fool, but he had to set the thought aside. Asu was protected by Iradu, his cousin Erre, and his guard of honor. He would not be able to fight all of them, still less with the whole enemy army so near. It was best to wait and search out an opportunity to get into the palace and stop Asu somehow, although at that moment it seemed impossible to him that he could manage it.

The forces of the House of Air came within a hundred paces of the castle wall. The tornadoes and hurricane winds that went before them were pushing the deadly fog toward the castle, protecting its own warriors. Suddenly there came a roar and the earth shook. A giant creature of ice, humanoid in shape and more than a hundred and fifty feet tall, rose up from the castle. It lifted one of its immense feet and stepped over the wall. The ground shook under its weight. They attacked it with tornadoes and whirlwinds. The creature was buffeted violently, so that for a moment it seemed it would lose its balance and fall, but it regained it and opened a huge icy mouth. From this came a tremendous freezing gust which froze everything it touched for more than a hundred paces. The tornadoes were petrified into ice, as were those warriors of the House of Air who were struck.

Confusion overcame the warriors. They began to attack the creature with electric javelins and stormy discharges. But they barely managed to scratch the giant's ice body as it continued its advance, using its breath to freeze all the soldiers who were attacking the walls. The Warriors regrouped for the attack, and the second and third lines began to launch balls of fire and missiles of rock against the creature. Once again the ground shook, and a second elemental appeared before the gates of the city. As colossal as the first, this one was of Ether and had the appearance of a gigantic, tormented spirit.

Asu was beside himself with fury. "Great Elementals!" he cried.

"How can they be so huge?" Erre asked, dumbfounded.

Asu looked behind him, then up at the sky. Alantres, the Eternal City, was enveloped in darkness; it had stopped radiating light with the Power of the Golden. “The city has been extinguished. They have deflected all the Power of the Great Monolith. They have used it to create those elemental monstrosities!”

The two colossal creatures began to spread death among the enemy troops. Warriors and Enforcers of the three Houses leapt on them, trying to harm them with their own elemental weapons, but barely succeeded in making any impact. With huge sweeps of arms and legs, the two giants sent the soldiers to their death.

Every step they took down the mountain made the ground shake and toppled the enemy units.

“You accursed old dotards! You will not defeat me! Not today! Not ever!”

“What are your orders, my Lord?” Iradu asked.

“My Lords! To me!” Asu called.

A hundred Lords came to present themselves. All of them wore claws on their right arms. They formed a circle around Asu, spreading their arms wide, touching each other’s fingertips.

“At my command!” said Asu.

The Lords closed their eyes and concentrated. Asu spread his arms and gave the order, and the Lords transferred all their Power to their Lord. Every last drop. So as not to die, they immediately activated their claws and injected into their own veins the slaves’ essence of life which was stored in the discs. They fell to the ground in exhaustion, senseless. Asu, charged with the Power of his Lords, roared out:

“Nobody can stop me! Nobody!”

There came an enormous amber flash, and a Great Elemental of Fire came to life. It was as gigantic as its rivals.

“Finish them off,” Asu ordered.

The Elemental went up the mountain city to fight its brothers. The Great Elemental of Ether stepped out to meet it, hurling the warriors at its feet through the air with every step. Meanwhile the Great Elemental of Ice was attacking the troops of the House of Air.

The two giants stared at each other with brutal golden eyes imbued with the Power of the Golden. The Great Elemental of Fire roared in defiance, and flames issued from its mouth. The Great Elemental of Ether, refusing to cower, replied with a spectral scream. The Elemental of Fire attacked, and a huge fiery arm struck the torso of the other Elemental. But the fiery arm went through the immaterial torso. The attacker roared in rage and frustration. The Elemental of Ether launched a lethal gust at its opponent. The gust wounded it and forced it to step back, but it recovered and counter-attacked. It opened its mouth and sent a great gust of fire against its enemy. The Elemental of Ether took the impact of the flames in its face and chest, and its ghostly body caught fire. Its opponent roared in triumph.

When the Great Elemental of Ice saw its ally perish, it stopped its attack against the warriors to engage with the Elemental of Fire. Both giants exchanged colossal blows as each tried to make the other fall. The Elemental of Ice took two steps forward and with a massive strike toppled its enemy, which fell backwards in gusts of flame like a mountain collapsing. The Elemental of Fire tried to get back to its feet, but its rival was already upon it. It rose to one knee, and before the blow could make contact it sent a burst of flame against the icy creature. But unlike what had happened with the Elemental of Ether, this time the gust of fire did not affect the ice creature in the same way. Part of its right arm and torso melted and fell to the ground as water. The Elemental of Ice roared and sent a freezing blast at the creature of fire. With a bray of despair, the Elemental of Fire went out, its flames dead beneath the power of water. It stayed there on its knees, its body a smoking mass. The Elemental of Ice launched a powerful kick, destroying its rival and sending its remains flying all over the battlefield.

“No! Damn you!” cried Asu. “Attack! All together!”

The Warriors and Lords of the three armies hurled themselves against the wounded Elemental. The giant creature kept fighting until it was brought down by the attack of thousands of warriors. It fell to the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces of ice, which a moment later were no more than water.

“Yes!” Asu cried exultantly. “Nothing is going to stop me!”

Adamis felt this was the end of his own people. Asu called his two allies, and they met at the command post.

“They are ours now!” he said.

“My Warriors are ready for the final attack,” Lurra said.

“My forces have been badly hit,” said Aize.

“So?” Asu shot back.

“So it would be better if it were Lurra’s forces that took the lead now.”

Asu turned to Lurra, his eyes narrowed. “And what do you think of that?”

Lurra’s eyes turned to the battlefield, then to Aize. He took a step toward him, and with a swift movement buried the stone dagger up to the hilt in his eye. Aize died with a look of bafflement on his face. Before his body had reached the ground, Iradu gave the order to attack the House of Air.

Asu smiled sardonically at Lurra. “You asked, and I granted it to you.”

Lurra looked satisfied. “Thank you,” he said, and gave an exaggerated bow. “I could never stand that whiner. He has got what he deserved.”

Asu nodded, eyes gleaming. “Iradu, do not leave a single Lord, Warrior, or Enforcer of the House of Air alive.”

“As you wish, my Lord.”

Adamis watched in astonishment as the forces of the House of Fire and the House of Earth betrayed those of the House of Air and put them to the knife. Evening came, and he witnessed the bloody fall of the once-powerful House of Air.

Chapter 34

The battle between men and Gods entered its decisive stage. Kyra and Albana had managed to eliminate the Lords and cause heavy casualties among the Warriors on the northern stretch of the plain. Meanwhile the Peoples of the Steppes and the Trees had surrounded the Warriors and were relentlessly pressing on with the aim of killing the Golden soldiers.

Ikai, on the other hand, was losing the battle in the south. The Warriors' initial assault had been brutal, but what followed was truly devastating. Once in the midst of the horde of rebels the Warriors, like the incredibly effective soldiers they were, began to deploy all their destructive power. The rebels fell dead under the onslaught of their silver spears and elemental shields, or else were blown apart when they were caught by explosions of Power which had been created to destroy everything around. For every Warrior that fell, hundreds of men died.

In the midst of the battle, Ikai sent Power to his protective sphere and confronted the God-Warrior in front of him. This Warrior belonged to the House of Ether and had created a lethal mist around him. More than thirty unfortunates had already fallen dead at his feet at the touch of this mist that seemed to devour their spirits. Ikai focused his attention and sent a Spirit of Agony against the Warrior, who defended himself with shield and elemental spear. But since it was a monster of the same element, ether, he could not manage to inflict any damage on it. Seeing the success of his attack, Ikai created a Spirit of Pain and launched it against the Warrior. The two spirits devoured the Golden, who was unable to defend himself.

An icy shock warned him that he was being attacked from behind, and he turned to find himself facing a Warrior of Water. He ordered his two spirits to attack, but this time the spear and shields of ice succeeded in damaging them. The Warrior destroyed them, although he was left badly wounded, and Ikai sent a third spirit to finish him off. His use of the Power had attracted the attention of several Warriors. One of them, from the House

of Earth, hurled a sharp-edged javelin of stone at Ikai's sphere with enormous strength. It weakened the sphere. To his right, Burdin leapt onto the back of a God of the House of Air. The enormous God-Warrior had created two whirlwinds with violent shakes of his shield. These sent the rebels flying through the air, to fall headlong on to their comrades.

Ikai and Burdin fought with all their might in the midst of a chaotic battle which they were losing, little by little. The rebels were fighting and dying like heroes. They would not give up, they kept attacking even when everything indicated that they were lost. A Warrior of the House of Fire saw Burdin standing up beside the body of the Golden he had just killed. He flicked his spear, and a fiery whip issued from it with a crack and caught Burdin in the back. The Highland warrior arched in pain and roared. The whip lashed again and struck him in the chest with tremendous force. He fell and did not get up again.

Several Warriors of Water were making their way forward through the sea of rebels, creating waves with a synchronized swinging of spears and shields. The waves they were spreading were icy, and the rebels were frozen to death as these reached them. The few survivors were cut to pieces by the icy spears of the Golden. The rebels defended themselves with bows and spears, but the Gods kept coming. They advanced, wounded countless times, continuing to kill like titans of War.

Ikai gave the death-blow to the Golden who was attacking him and glanced hastily round to assess the situation. Twenty Warriors of the House of Fire were advancing from the east, destroying anyone in their way with fireballs and outbursts of flames. The battle was lost. He wiped the sweat from his brow, breathed out heavily and gave the order to retreat. Burdin, wounded, looked up at him from the ground, imploring him to go on fighting. Ikai shook his head. He could understand his friend's feelings and would have given anything to carry on, but it was suicide. The Warriors were too strong. They were being butchered.

"Retreat!" he cried to his people.

The survivors of the Senoca, the People of the Highlands and the People of the West began to fall back towards the New Shelter. They ran for their lives as the Golden regrouped, preparing to hunt them down.

To the north, Kyra noticed that her brother was retreating.

“We have to help them!” she shouted to Albana.

Albana nodded gravely. “They’re being massacred. There are too many of them. Let’s get things here finished and help them.”

They attacked more fiercely, finally managing to finish off the last Warriors who were still resisting in the north.

“We did it!” Kyra shouted, her energy renewed.

“We need to get into formation and move south,” said Albana.

They reorganized their forces quickly and began to move toward the New Shelter. At the far end they could see Ikai and his people running away from the two thousand and more Warriors, who were pursuing them in two long lines in an unbroken formation, keeping up a marching step.

Ikai ordered the rebels to take cover in the houses. Here they would make their last stand, on roofs, at windows and in doorways. They brought out bows, arrows and knives and prepared for the end. Death was on its way, echoing on the plain under the boots of those elemental soldiers of horror and destruction.

From the roof of one of the houses in the center, Ikai searched for his sister and Albana.

Burdin was stretched out on the roof. “Are they on their way?” he asked. Ikai could not understand how he could still be alive. With those wounds he should have died, but he refused to.

“They’re on their way, don’t worry. They’ll catch them from behind.”

Burdin smiled. “We’ll finish them off,” he said confidently.

Ikai weighed up the situation. Even with Kyra and Albana’s forces, their chances were slight. He scanned the battlefield, where more than a hundred thousand braves, men and women, lay dead. Rage and frustration brought the beginning of tears to his eyes. *They can’t just have died for nothing. We can’t all die for nothing.* He tightened his fist over the disc and wished he could have the Power to stop that army of Golden before they annihilated all Men. But he did not have it, and the end was approaching inexorably.

Three hundred paces from the houses, the Warriors stopped. The front line stepped forward and took up its formation. The second turned to face Kyra and Albana’s forces and took a step forward too. Ikai sighed deeply. Seeing those two formations, he knew they would not make it. Even

without their Lords, these soldiers knew what they had to do and how to do it. They were perfectly trained in the art of war.

Kyra and Albana's forces stopped three hundred paces away and waited for Ikai's signal to attack. He put the horn to his lips and was about to blow it, but did not. If he gave the order, they would most likely all die. His heart was telling him to use it; his rational mind prevented him. He took a deep breath. Fighting meant a chance for them: a slight one, but a chance nonetheless. Fleeing doomed them to be hunted and executed. He owed it to all those who had already given their lives. His heart won over his head, for once. *We'll fight! For them, for all!*

He took a breath and was about to blow the horn when he saw the five golden carriages in the distance. Each of them was coming on to the plain from a different direction. His heart missed a beat. More Lords! He shook his head. He could not believe his bad luck. The five carriages advanced separately until they had the Golden army in their sights, then stopped. He watched them closely, trying to work out what this could mean. He could see them better now: they were not Lords but Eyes-of-the-Gods, Enforcers. He lowered the horn, at a loss. The Eyes stretched out their hands and discs flashed on them, each one the color of their respective House. The flashes were repeated at intervals.

Suddenly the two lines of Warriors broke their formation. *What on earth are they doing?* he wondered. They divided into the Five Houses and each one formed itself into a triangle. Very slowly, closely observing one another, they began to retreat and separate. What could all this mean? All of a sudden, before the astonished gaze of all, from the House of Fire there flew a huge ball of fire which crashed against the triangle of the House of Ether and exploded in flames. From the triangle of the House of Earth flew an enormous boulder, spinning vertiginously, which crashed against the side of the triangle of the House of Water.

Ikai was left open-mouthed, so that it took him a few moments to react. *By Oxatsi! They're attacking each other!* What was happening? And more importantly: why? The triangle of the House of Air was retreating, while the Houses of Water and Ether defended themselves against the attacks and launched attacks of their own. Suddenly the House of Fire attacked that of Air, which attacked in turn.

Seeing this, Ikai finally realized what it meant: the Eyes on the carriages were messengers sent by the Golden Houses. He tapped the bracelet on his right hand and heard the message the discs were repeating over and over: *The great Golden war has begun. Glory to the winner.*

“The Golden… are at war,” he stammered.

Burdin assumed he had not heard properly. “What did you say?”

Ikai gestured at the battle taking place between the triangular formations. “The Gods are fighting each other.”

“By the three goddesses! This gives us a chance!”

Ikai nodded. “It does. This changes everything.”

Without wasting any more time he crouched and activated the bracelet. Using Adamis’s disc he made contact with his sister and Albana. It was risky, but this new situation demanded it.

“Are you risking communication? It might be intercepted,” came Albana’s immediate reply.

Almost simultaneously Kyra demanded: “What’s the matter? Why are they fighting each other?”

“Stay put. The Golden are at war.”

“If they’re at war, we’re the least of their problems now. I doubt if there’ll be anyone listening to what we’re saying.”

“That’s probably true,” Albana said thoughtfully.

“That’s really good news!” Kyra said. Her voice was jubilant.

“Don’t get involved. Let’s see how things develop.”

“Right,” said Kyra. “That’s the wisest thing to do, even though I’d gladly cut them all to pieces! What are we going to do once they finish killing each other?”

“Wait to see how it all ends. Let’s not be too hasty. Be ready for my signal.”

“We will be,” Albana said.

The battle between the Gods was both terrible and devastating. The Warriors used their entire arsenal of elemental power without breaking their triangular formation. The attacks were concentrated, seeking to break the defenses by pounding against the sides and damaging them. The din they

created was deafening, as if a thousand storms were gathered together above the battlefield. When one Warrior was brought down, another from inside the triangle took his place. Little by little the three Houses lost soldiers under these devastating attacks. The first triangle to fall was that of the House of Ether, one of whose sides collapsed when the last Warriors who formed the barrier were engulfed in flames. The House of Earth attacked them mercilessly with a rain of rock and explosions of stone. Under this pressure they tried to retreat, but the House of Fire bombarded them with fire. The flames from the explosions finished off the last forces of the House of Ether.

Ikai realized that the Houses of Fire and Earth, instead of attacking one another, were jointly attacking the other Houses. This was revealing. Soon afterwards the House of Water fell, its soldiers wiped out by flames and rock. Finally their focus turned to the House of Air. Its Warriors created great winds and generated hundreds of electrical discharges to fall on their enemies. These caused many casualties, but they could not withstand the two Houses in alliance. And suddenly everything fell silent. The din faded and the two surviving triangles remained motionless. They had both been severely battered and were barely left with enough warriors to hold the formation. Ikai waited patiently. He did not want to be hasty. Would they attack each other?

The two triangles began to move, advancing toward each other. He half-closed his eyes. What was going to happen? To his surprise, the triangles of the House of Fire and the House of Earth fused into one.

“There seems to be something more behind this,” he muttered. “Alliances…”

Burdin looked at him blankly.

Ikai pondered for a long moment, as he liked to do. He came to a decision and communicated with Kyra and Albana.

“We’ll kill the victors.”

“That’s a good decision, brother.”

“Are you sure?” Albana asked.

“Yes. We need to send a very clear message to the Eternal City. If they attack us they’ll be decimated.”

“Agreed.”

“Get ready. We’ll attack at my signal.”

The signal came, and a sea of rebels surrounded the enemy triangle. For a moment nobody attacked. The Golden kept up their defensive formation, while the rebels smeared their weapons with Aruma’s preparation. Very slowly, Ikai took five steps forward and stood facing one side of the triangle. Kyra and Albana did the same and faced the other two. The Golden were watching them. Ikai raised his protective sphere, and a moment later the other two raised their own. The Golden could not ignore the provocation and attacked, focusing their elemental power on the three of them. Ikai let out his breath in a long sigh. This was just what he wanted. Their spheres would withstand the first charges, and this would prevent them from attacking their people. He sent more power to his sphere to strengthen it, then gave the order.

“Attack! For freedom!”

The sea of Men hurled itself at the islet of Golden.

And the unthinkable happened.

The Men defeated the Gods.

Chapter 35

“Take the Royal Palace!” Asu ordered his troops.

The armies of the Houses of Fire and Earth hurled themselves into the attack. The battle was ferocious. The defenders of the House of Ether, with the help of the survivors of the House of Water, fought with all their might, their Power and their desperation, knowing that to yield a single step would mean their end. The first to die and vanish from the battlefield on both sides were the Enforcers. They fell in great numbers, unable to face the immense Power of their Lords.

The Lords were creating elemental storms, which battered walls and battlements with the aim of smoothing the way for the Warriors. With outbursts of fire and earth, the Warriors propelled themselves to the battlements. While they were in the air they sent elemental missiles against the defenders, who in their turn attacked them, trying to prevent them setting foot on the walls. Thousands of warriors in red and brown launched themselves into the sky and fell onto the battlements like a plague of colossal locusts. The Warriors and Lords of Ether defended themselves by creating ghosts of pain and death, accompanying them with lethal mists.

But the enemy possessed a secret weapon, quite apart from their clear superiority in numbers.

Asu showed his followers the Claw he carried on his right arm. “Use these!” “Unleash all your Power on the enemy, without fear! The Claws will replenish your essence of life! You are immortal now! You will not age a single day! By my grace! Charge without mercy!”

And little by little, the defenders fell beneath the enemy’s superiority until the call to retreat sounded. The assaulting forces at last took the walls, where they strengthened their position and took their toll of the defenders in their retreat back to the royal castle: the last defense.

“The walls are ours,” Iradu said to Asu. “Do we attack the palace?”

Asu exchanged a glance with his cousin Erre, who in turn looked at Iradu, who nodded. “Everything is ready, my lord.”

“In that case we wait.”

Adamis was about to leave; he wanted to fight with his own people and defend the royal palace. But this puzzled him. What did Asu mean? What was he waiting for?

Lurra and his Champion strode towards the command post. Behind them came the guard of honor of Earth.

“We have a serious problem,” Lurra announced.

Asu turned to him, looking puzzled.

“My spies have informed me that the House of Hila, the House of the Dead, is attacking the rings we have left unprotected. They have taken advantage of the fact that we are fighting here to stab us in the back.”

“The banished House?” Asu cried. “How dare they? This is an outrage!”

“We have to retreat and defend our Houses,” said Lurra. “While we are fighting here to conquer the First Ring, our homes are left defenseless.”

“That is not a good strategy,” Asu said.

Lurra shook his head. “I know you want victory here. So do I, but I cannot allow those ghouls to attack my home without defending it.”

“One must make many sacrifices in war,” Asu said.

“I cannot do what you are asking of me. My House is my first duty.”

“I guessed you might say that.”

“I am leaving with my troops.”

“That will not be necessary,” Asu said, and gave a crooked smile.

“What do you mean by that?”

Asu pointed behind Lurra.

At the head of a hundred sinister Lords came Beltz, King of the exiled House of Hila. With him was his nephew Lord Woz. They were macabre enough to be unmistakable. They were dressed in black from head to foot, with the exception of a silver sash where they carried two long curved daggers. On their golden foreheads, on their shaven heads and under their eyes the strange symbols of their death-rituals were tattooed in black. But

what made them truly unmistakable was their eyes: black, with golden irises and white pupils.

Lurra stared blankly at the newcomers. “What is this?” he stammered. “What are they doing here?”

Asu took out a fiery dagger and without a word, buried it up to the hilt in the back of his neck.

“This, my dear Friend,” said Asu, “means there will only be one High King: myself.”

Lurra, his eyes staring from their sockets, turned and groped for the dagger that had killed him. He met Asu’s eyes, filled with greed.

“Traitor…I should have known…”

“Yes, but you were not clever enough. Or did you really believe I was going to share Alantres with you?”

The King of Earth collapsed with a look of horror on his face.

“Fool,” Asu spat out with utter scorn. “Kill all the Warriors and Lords of the House of Earth. We have no further need of them.”

Iradu, Erre and Asu’s Guard of Honor had already attacked the dead king’s escort. The fight was brief and brutal.

“It is lucky that I have no ambitions,” Beltz said with a broad smile.

“Ambitions are very dangerous,” Asu replied, and his eyes flashed.

“Alantres and being High King myself do not interest me in the least. They are all yours.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” Asu said. His smile was threatening. “Otherwise you would end up like all the others.

Beltz nodded. “But I do require my compensation for helping you.”

“And so you will. All the dead will be yours, now and in the future.”

Beltz smiled. “I am sure there will be plenty. My House will be delighted.”

“There will indeed be. This is a beneficial alliance for both of us. I will rule, and you will have countless corpses for your sacrilegious rituals.”

“A perfect alliance,” Beltz said. His smile was wide, his eyes dark and profound as death itself.

“Just remember to keep your hands off Alantres.”

“The living do not interest my House. We leave them to you. When we have finished here, we will go back to our island. To our exile.”

“Very well. Otherwise…” Asu nodded towards Lurra’s body.

Beltz smiled and spread his arms wide in agreement.

“Now let us take the fortress, and destroy the other rings. Everybody shall know who the sole High King is. Everybody shall kneel and beg for their lives before me!”

Adamis had already witnessed enough. He had learned of Asu’s master-move. With a feeling of overwhelming anxiety clutching at his chest, he went to a secret entrance at the harbor-side. He did so as quickly and discreetly as his battered body would allow him, making sure nobody saw him. The secret entrance would lead him down a long passage which led to the cellars of the royal palace. The royal family had built several such secret passages so as to evacuate the Royal Palace in case of need. He intended to use one of them to reach his father.

When he reached the palace cellars, he took off his helmet so that his face would be seen and he would be recognized as who he was: the Prince of Ether. What he found when he arrived filled his heart with sorrow. They had piled the dead in the cellars; there were thousands of them. He recognized Lords and members of his own family. Two warriors of the Guard challenged him. He revealed himself, and they bowed when they realized who he was.

They offered him a suit of armor in the colors of the House of Ether so that he would not be mistaken for an assailant. He donned his House colors proudly and went in search of his father.

As he went up the white marble stairs he could hear the screams and elemental explosions of the desperate fighting close at hand. He found his father in the throne hall, surrounded by his loyal defenders.

Teslo, the Champion of the House of Ether, challenged him. “Who goes there?” he cried.

“Do you not recognize me, Teslo?”

The Champion shook his head. “But… it is impossible… I killed you…”

“Yes, but the sentence has not yet been fully carried out.”

Teslo sank to one knee and bowed his head in respect. “My lord… I…”

“I know, Teslo, you did your duty. You have nothing to reproach yourself for.”

“Thank you, your Highness. I will take you to your Father.”

Laino, High King of Ether, was giving orders to his Lords and did not notice their arrival.

Adamis felt a lump in his throat. Contradictory feelings of love and hate were struggling in his heart. “Father…” he said.

Laino’s face changed from the most intense concern to confusion and denial, but after the first moment, it lit up with the greatest joy.

“Adamis! You are alive!”

Adamis was struggling between the joy he felt at seeing his father and the pain of his rejection and death sentence. “Yes, Father.”

“I cannot believe it,” Laino said, wide-eyed. “It is a dream,”

“No Father, I am here and I am still alive. I have come to help.”

“After what I did? You have still come?”

“Yes Father. This is my family, my home. If you need me I will always come.”

Tears welled up in Laino’s eyes. “But I ordered you to be killed.”

“You are my father… I will always love you…” The words came out without thinking and as he heard them come out of his own mouth he realized it was true, and so it would always be.

“How could I have been such a fool?”

“You did what was best for your House. It was I who betrayed you by helping the slaves.”

“I was wrong, I knew the moment I gave the order. Will you be able to forgive me some day?”

“I already have, Father. I do not hold it against you.” And to his surprise, it was true: the pain was receding from his heart and there only remained love for the one who had given him life.

“My son, I am so sorry. This meaningless war, this horror, was what I wanted to avoid. That is why I did it, that is why I condemned you – and for what? For nothing. This horror has come to pass regardless of how hard I might have tried to prevent it. How stupid I feel. How wrongly I have

behaved before the arrogance of the Golden, the slavery of men. Before you."

"That is the past. It is forgotten. Let us look toward the future."

"Thank you, my son. You have no idea what having you back here means after what I did to you."

"Asu has been very shrewd, and has struck a blow which nobody could have anticipated. Your actions have been fair. You condemned me in order to avoid a war."

"I ordered that punishment for you in the hope of a miracle… Notaplo told me there was a chance, and that is why I chose the dagger Slayer of Kings. Because of that chance. And it happened."

"Yes, old Notaplo was right again. The Children of Arutan saved me."

"That sect of traitors? Impossible. We thought they were extinct."

"Yes, you owe my life to them. And much more, for they have been watching over the good of the Golden from the shadows."

"In that case, and because it comes from you, I will thank them if the moment comes."

"You should. And thank you for giving me a chance with the Dagger…"

He took Adamis's face in his hands. "I could not kill my own son in cold blood, I simply could not…"

Farther and son gazed into one another's eyes, Laino wept, and those tears washed away all the pain Adamis had been carrying with him. They embraced. Everybody in the hall was staring at them.

Laino turned to them." This is Adamis, my son, heir to the throne, and here today with you, my most loyal people, as witnesses, I reinstate him as my successor and heir.

"Hail Adamis!"

"Hail, Prince of the House of Ether!" cried Teslo.

"Hail!" they all echoed.

The explosions and shouting outside intensified. One of the Lords arrived at a run.

"They have launched the final offensive!"

"Defend the House!" Laino ordered his people.

“What can I do?” Adamis asked.

“I have no Power left. I have consumed it all.”

“And the High King of the House of Water?”

“He died defending the walls. They have taken him to his temple on the mainland to give him an honorable burial.”

“I am sorry for your loss… I know you were good friends.”

“A whole life as allies. He fought with honor and courage to save his people. He deserves our respect and the final rest of a High King.”

Adamis nodded, and Laino looked at him with concern. “You must save your mother and the others.”

“Where is Mother?”

“In the chamber of the Royal Portal. She is organizing the evacuation in case we are unable to resist.”

“Will we be able to?”

Laino sighed deeply. “I believe not. They are too strong.”

“Then we will fight to the end. I will be by your side.”

Laino, his eyes moist and with a lump in his throat, could barely manage to say: “Thank you, my son.”

A series of fiery eruptions, very close at hand, shook the walls of the chamber. Part of the ceiling collapsed.

“They are at the gates!” came the warning.

Laino grasped Adamis by the shoulders.

“Go and see your mother, make sure we have an escape route.”

“I will go at once.”

“Thank you, my son.”

Adamis went along the corridors of the palace amid the noise of explosions. His father’s Warriors took cover behind columns and improvised barricades to resist the final attack. When he reached the chamber in the Portal, he found it crowded with Golden from the two allied Houses. These were the refugees from the House of Water, together with those Golden of the House of Ether who were not equipped for fighting. But he found something else which made him stop in fear: in several adjoining chambers were hundreds of Golden from the House of Air, and

even of the House of Earth. They were being guarded by Warriors of the House of Ether. *What are they doing here? How did they get here?*

He found his mother in front of the great portal, speaking to a group of Erudites.

“Mother…” he said, hardly able to swallow.

She turned round and stared at him. When she first recognized him it was as though she was confronting an apparition.

“Adamis! My son!” she cried, and ran to hug him.

“Mother, this is such a glad moment!”

“You are alive!” She touched her son’s face and arms to make sure he was not just a spirit. “You are alive!” she repeated, and her eyes filled with tears.

“I am fine, Mother. I am alive.”

“I begged him not to do it, I begged him to forgive you, but he would not listen.”

“He did what he had to do for the good of the House.”

“I will never forgive him. Never. I left his side the moment he condemned you, and I will never go back to him.”

“Mother… he has reinstated me.”

“That gladdens my soul, but it does not change what he did. I am here for all these people who are suffering and will die if I do not help them, but not for him.”

“He gave me a chance… the dagger…”

“Of not dying? Just one? No, I will never forgive him.”

Adamis embraced her, and she covered him with kisses and tenderness

“My dearest son is back with me,” she said amid tears of joy.

Adamis indicated the Golden from the rival Houses.

“Mother… what are they doing here?”

“They have been arriving recently. They have been betrayed by the House of Fire, and their Rings are being attacked by the House of Hila. They asked me for shelter, and I have granted it to them. I do not even want to think of the unnatural things the House of Hila would do to them. I could not refuse them. It would have meant condemning them to an end worse

than death. They came through their own Royal Portals. But a moment ago they stopped coming. We do not know why."

Adamis turned to the Portal and noticed that it was indeed turned off.

"What is the matter with it?"

"The Erudites do not know. But it seems it is not only our own. As the refugees have stopped arriving, we suspect their own Portals have also stopped working."

"That is strange. Very strange."

"The city portals use the Power of the Great Monolith. They say that something is preventing it from working."

"The enemy?"

"As far as we know, they have not reached the monolith. Your father destroyed the four passes."

"I will go and find out what is going on."

"No, stay here with me. I have only just got you back. You cannot leave yet."

Adamis gestured around him. The faces of the refugees reflected their fear. "We must take them to safety or else they will die."

"Very well," she said resignedly. "But be very careful."

"I will be, Mother, do not worry."

The Queen kissed his cheek, and he left.

A growing unease in his stomach warned him of what he was going to find.

Chapter 36

Adamis arrived at the inner dock of the First Ring and went to one of the moored ships. There were no signs of fighting, which left him feeling easier. It did not look as if the enemy troops had reached the inner ring. And if that were so, then why had the Great Monolith stopped working? With these thoughts in mind he went on board and set off toward the central island.

He moored the ship and left it as quickly as he could. He was in the very center of the Eternal City, at the foot of the gigantic monolith which fed Power to Alantres. He checked the base of the artifact and felt a chill, followed by an intense stab of pain in his back. Inside was the High Chamber, where the Five High Kings met and decided upon the lives of Golden and Men.

He looked closely at the entrance to the sacred temple and stiffened when he saw his father’s guards in front of the door. They were dead. At once he raised his protective sphere and readied himself. Something was going wrong, very wrong. He thought immediately of Asu. How could he have got there? If he was in control of the great monolith, they were lost.

With the greatest care he opened the doors and entered the great chamber, as fast as his body would allow him to. No-one saw him. When he looked around, what he saw stunned him. It was not Asu who was controlling the monolith, as he had feared: it was the Children of Arutan! Trying to understand what was happening, he found himself unable to move.

He recognized Aruma, surrounded by a hundred of her acolytes. They were in two circles, with the old woman at the center. Making up the first ring, the larger of the two, were the majority of her acolytes, most of them young. In the second there were only a dozen Golden, and by their appearance and their considerable age he guessed they must be the Ancients, the leaders. They were carrying out some kind of ancestral ritual.

All of them had their arms raised toward the base of the black monolith, and their eyes were closed in a mystical trance. Beside Aruma in the center had been placed a great transparent container in the shape of a pod. Inside it was a brownish-green liquid.

He had no idea what was going on, but seeing his allies there he decided to find out. He lowered his protective sphere.

“Aruma, what are you doing here? What is happening?”

The old witch turned to him and smiled broadly.

“The Prince of Ether has found us, and he is well,” she said. She sounded pleased. “I never believed you would manage to get as far as this, not amid the horror and chaos of this war. It gladdens my soul to see you safe and sound.”

Nobody else turned round; all went on with the ritual.

“Thank you, Aruma. It has not been easy, but in the end I succeeded. I too am delighted to see you. How did you get here?”

She gave him a malicious grin. “Oh, you know we have our ways…”

Adamis imagined they must have used a secret passage or something of the sort. Aruma and her people had many secrets, so he was not especially surprised.

“What are you doing to the Great Monolith?”

“It is a sacred ritual to Arutan, our Mother Nature.”

“You have to stop. You are interfering with the Power of the monolith, and we need it to use the Royal Portal and evacuate the survivors sheltering in my House.”

Aruma nodded thoughtfully several times.

“We had not taken that possibility into account,” she said, sounding concerned. She pondered, then went on: “Unfortunately we can’t stop the sacred ritual. I’m sorry it interferes with the functioning of the Portal, I truly am, but it’s imperative that we continue.”

“Listen, Aruma, if you do not stop it thousands of refugees will be exterminated. The royal palace is about to fall. Asu will not leave anybody alive, you know that. You must help me.”

“I would like to be able to help you, Adamis, you know in my heart I feel it so, but I regret I must deny your petition.”

Adamis gaped at her. “I cannot believe it. You are not being serious, surely?”

“The ritual must continue. There is too much at stake.”

“Aruma, you cannot! You are sentencing them to death!”

“They’re dead already, my dear Prince. We’re all doomed. It’s just a matter of time.”

“By Alantres! What are you saying? Are you all out of your minds? We have to save them! My mother! My father! They will all die!”

“My young friend, the final hour has arrived,” Aruma said, and her face turned somber. “What we predicted would happen has occurred. For long the omens showed us that the day would arrive when our civilization’s greed and pride would lead us to the destruction of Mother Nature. That day has come, and that is why we must acct.”

“What day? Act in what way?” he asked. He was trying to understand what was happening and find some way out of the situation.

“Today is the day the Golden have decided to take an irreversible path toward the end of our existence. Asu and his allies of the House of the Dead will win. They will take power, and it will be the end for our mother. Nothing and nobody will be able to stop them. They will destroy not only the Golden and Men, but Mother Nature herself. Today is the day when the final stage begins which leads toward the end of time. And that is why we must act to stop it. Tomorrow all will be lost.”

“There must be something we could do. Not everything is lost. My father is still holding out.”

“Yes. And he’ll do whatever he can to protect his House and his allies, but in the end he will perish. The Houses of Water and Ether are doomed. Just as the Houses of Air and Earth have already perished. They will all be fodder for the House of the Dead and its corrupt Power. The dead will rise and walk the earth to continue devouring and killing in a vicious, unbreakable cycle. The House of the Dead is an aberration which will corrupt the living. But the one who will really destroy the world is Asu, with his boundless greed. He will use all the technologies that have been developed to exploit Mother Nature and create more Power and become the most powerful being in our universe. He will seek to live eternally,

exploiting humans, nature, and whatever else he may find. Like a huge black hole that swallows everything: life, power, everything."

"Can you not destroy him? Kill him?"

She sighed deeply. "If we could, we would already have done so. We have tried, several times, without success. And in any case, even if we succeeded in killing him, another would take his place. Another with the same ambitions to rule and become immortal, or something even worse, because that's what the Golden are fed from birth, and it's all they know how to do, all they aspire to. The technologies for the destruction of our Mother are already working, and you've seen them in action. Over time they'll develop others even worse in their insane pursuit of immortality and absolute power. The root of the problem is the beliefs and goals of our civilization which are now leading us to the abyss. Our civilization will destroy this world."

"Then let us stop Asu," he said, trying to gain time. "Then we can think about the future later on."

Aruma shook her head. "You yourself have been witness to the devastating power of Asu and his new ally. We can't stop him. He'll win."

"What are you going to do?" Adamis asked with deep apprehension.

"We've spent a long time preparing for this day. We knew it would come. Whether it was Asu or some other Golden who would drive us to the edge of the cliff. We've worked a lot, searching for some way to stop the destruction of this world. I myself have devoted my whole life to it, just as they have." She indicated the circle of the dozen Elders, with a grateful smile. "And in the end we found out how to do it."

"Then there is hope!"

"Yes, but it requires an unequalled sacrifice. One that most Golden aren't prepared to make."

"What is it? Perhaps I will be able to convince them."

She waved a hand toward her companions and the base of the great monolith. "This ritual."

"I do not understand…"

"Do you remember the Toxin I spent so long working on?"

Remembering that she had been seeking to create an extremely potent toxin, he felt a deep unease. “Yes… the poison. Did you succeed?”

“Yes, in the end I did.”

“And what are you going to do with it?”

“Not only have I found it, I’ve managed to ensure that it only causes death to the Golden and remains harmless to men, animals and plants.”

Adamis thought that this would give them a chance. “What are you planning to do? Will you use it against Asu’s army?”

“Yes, and no,” Aruma said. There was deep sadness in her eyes.

“Why not? It is a good idea. It could work. How do we use it?”

“Well, you see, once it’s in the environment we can’t control its area of effect. It will kill every Golden it encounters.”

“My mother? My people?”

She nodded heavily.

“They could get to safety using the Royal Portal! They could go to the Great Continent!”

The leader of the Children of Arutan sighed deeply and shook her head. Adamis stared at her, and finally he understood.

“You do not want anybody to get away. You do not want any Golden to reach the mainland. You want to kill them all, here, in Alantres.”

She lowered her gaze. “At last you understand.”

Adamis realized the lunacy of what the Children of Arutan meant to do. “You cannot! That would be genocide! A holocaust!”

“It’s the sacrifice which Mother Nature demands. As long as the Golden rule this world, she will be endangered. And that is a sacrifice our people are not prepared to make.”

“You are going to kill us all! This is madness! Stop!”

“Not all. There are a few among us who are immune to the toxin. They will be spared, the rest will die. It’s the only way to save this world. Believe me, I wouldn’t do it if there were any other solution.”

“You are out of your mind! You are driving us to extinction as a species!”

“No. The few who will survive will begin a new era. One based on the lesson they have learned. They will not repeat the mistakes of the past. They will not seek immortality and absolute power. They will live in harmony with other species and with Mother Nature.”

“You have no guarantee that it will happen like that. They might just as easily follow the same path that led us here.”

“That was foreseen.”

He saw the flash of intelligence in her eyes.

“You have prepared a safeguard.”

She nodded, with a crooked smile.

“You are immune. You will survive,” he said, understanding her game.

Aruma shook her head emphatically. She waved her hand and Sormacus came forward from the shadows.

“No, not me. My disciples will be in charge of making sure that the Rebirth of the Golden follows the course laid out for them.”

At the sight of Sormacus, an image came to Adamis’ mind: the blackened lips he had noticed on several occasions.

“I thought you were sick…”

“No, I was taking small doses of the poison so as to become immune. I’ve been doing it since I was a little boy.”

“Sormacus, make her see reason. You are intelligent, you know this is an insane mistake.”

Sormacus shook his head. “It’s the only way. We’ve studied all the scenarios and alternatives. We’ve been doing that for centuries. No other option except Rebirth is viable. It’s that or else complete destruction.”

“No!” Adamis cried out,

“Remember, we made a deal,” Aruma told him. “I would help you to get back to Alantres, and one day I would ask you for something you would find very difficult to do but which you promised to fulfill.”

“I remember…”

“Today is that day. You must honor the deal. I’m asking you not to interfere.”

“I cannot do it. I cannot let you kill them all.”

“You owe me. You must honor what we agreed.”

Adamis shook his head. “You ask something of me which I cannot do.”

“You knew it would be so.”

“Yes, but not this.”

“Then you will break your word and not carry out what we agreed on, and which you owe me.”

“I cannot…”

Desperate, seeing he would get nowhere with them and that this madness would kill most of the Golden, he was left with no other option. He would have to fight against them and stop them, however much he might hate doing so. He could not allow them to exterminate the Golden, whether or not they were right to do so. He simply could not let them commit such an atrocity. With his eyes fixed on Aruma, he raised his protective sphere and prepared to attack.

“It won’t do you any good.” Aruma said.

Out of the shadows, behind his back, Ariadne appeared. Adamis spun to face her. Her sword went through his protective sphere and the tip of the blade touched his neck.

“Ariadne…” he stammered, utterly taken aback. “You are dead… Lord Erre… the House of Fire…”

“No Adamis, I’m alive. We tricked you.”

“You too?”

Ariadne nodded without taking her eyes off him. “And as you can see, I have a sword like the one Aruma gave you, the one which hangs at your waist. Your sphere is useless. I will not hesitate to kill you if you so much as blink. I owe myself to my people, to the cause.”

“The same goes for those who try to protect themselves from the toxin. I have mixed it with the preparation so as to penetrate protective shields. Everything has been seen to. The Rebirth of the Golden can’t be stopped.” Aruma said.

Adamis felt that he was the greatest fool in existence. He had been part of their plans, had helped them to bring those plans to fruition without realizing. All the time he believed he was being helped, it was really he who was helping Aruma carry out her plan.

“You have used me, from the very beginning, ever since you sent me the pearl.”

“We needed you, we needed Men, to attain our aim. We never lied to you. We explained to you what was happening, what would come later …”

“You never explained about this madness!”

“Because I knew you would not approve. That’s why Ariadne has always been near you. Following you like a shadow.”

“She has a Chameleon Ring like the one you gave me, does she not?”

Aruma nodded. Ariadne showed him the palm of her left hand with the ring in it, while the right grasped the sword-hilt firmly. She put it away in the folds of her robe.

“She received the same gifts as you. With different aims in mind.”

Adamis bent his head. “I cannot believe it.”

“We are doing it for the good of all,” Sormacus said, “Golden and Men. If there were any other way we wouldn’t sacrifice so many of our own, believe me, Adamis.”

“I think you believe it is the only option, but you are wrong, I assure you. Very wrong!”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” Aruma said. “I can’t blame you for not seeing the greater good.”

“There is no good that could justify this! Stop!”

Aruma bowed her head and sighed. “If he moves, kill him,” she said to Ariadne.

The young woman nodded. There was a tacit threat in the stare she turned on Adamis.

“Sormacus, the hour is come. Activate the mechanism,”

“No! You will kill thousands of innocents!”

The hundred Children of Arutan began an ominous chant. Sormacus went to the great transparent container and pulled the side levers. From the top of the pod issued an enormous golden needle. The liquid in the container began to boil, and an instant later it began to turn into gas, which issued from the needle under pressure toward the base of the Great Monolith.

The Children of Arutan in the outer circle concentrated all their power on the base of the monolith. The toxic vapor began to penetrate it. Adamis did not understand what they were trying to do, but then he saw it through the crystal ceiling. A huge toxic cloud, circular in shape, was forming around the monolith like a silver-green ring. The more power the Children of Arutan sent, the bigger and denser this cloud became.

“No! Tell them to stop!” he pleaded. He tried to move, and the sword grazed his neck. Ariadne shook her head. Her eyes told him clearly that she would kill him if he tried to stop them.

Aruma’s gaze was condescending. “They’re all sacrificing themselves here today. They’re sending forth all their Power so that the toxin reaches the boundaries of this world. They won’t stop until all their Power has been consumed.”

Adamis shook his head in disbelief. They were all insane.

“Send it forth!” she said.

“No!”

“Nothing can be done now. My children are giving all their Power and their Life. They will die consumed. They are sacrificing themselves for a new beginning, for the Rebirth of the Golden.”

The Children of Arutan in the outer circle were now using all their power, and amplified by that of the Great Monolith the toxic ring began to spread and cover the land around it. As they died, the cloud expanded in the form of a damp mist which sank as far as the inner spaces of the earth.

“Let me save them!” Adamis pleaded.

“If you leave this chamber you will die,” Aruma said. “The toxic cloud will spread over all Alantres. They will all die, you included.”

“How long?”

“A day.”

“Even so, let me go.”

She shook her head. “You are condemning yourself. You could be part of the Rebirth if you choose to stay.”

“I owe myself to my people. I must go to them. They are my family.”

“You won’t be able to save them.”

“Grant this to me. For the friendship we shared.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry that this is your choice. But I’ll grant you your wish. Let him go, Ariadne.”

The young woman looked at Aruma, who nodded. She lowered her sword.

Adamis ran out of the chamber.

“Goodbye, Prince of Ether,” Aruma murmured as he left.

Chapter 37

Adamis went back to the dock in the first ring and leapt off the boat. A sharp pain in his side left him slumped on his knees with his hand on his ribs. He cursed the weakness of his battered body. He raised his eyes ready to go on and at that moment he felt it: a damp feeling with a sour taste to it which soaked his whole body from head to foot. *I am doomed.* He looked up at the sky and saw that the great poisonous cloud had passed over him and was spreading towards the First Ring, covering everything it found in its path.

Everything around him was now a toxic mist. He was aware that there was no hope for him now. But he was not afraid, perhaps because he was already under sentence of death and living on borrowed time. He had now received a second death sentence and would be dead within a day. *I will get up and fight to the end*, he told himself, and gathering strength from his royal pride he got to his feet and went to look for his people, and try to save them.

He arrived in the throne hall in the midst of the din of the battle. He found his father lying on the ground surrounded by the last of his loyal subjects, who were defending him. Part of the wall and ceiling had collapsed, and through the gap the enemy Warriors were trying to make their way in. The soldiers of the House of Ether were doing all they could to repel them in one last suicidal defense. The noise was deafening.

Teslo, Champion of the House of Ether, was leading the defense, fighting in the front line. Like a demon of the mist he was killing every enemy who dared to come into the chamber.

Adamis saw that his father was badly wounded.

“Father!”

“Adamis, my son.” His smile was twisted in pain, and he grimaced as he spoke. “It is nothing, just a scratch.”

Adamis looked inquiringly at the two ancient healers beside the High King of Ether. They shook their heads, deep sadness in their eyes. A little further away, wearing a strange white-hooded robe trimmed with gold, a Priest was waiting solemnly. Adamis remembered that this was a Guardian Priest. His Father was dying, and there was nothing that could be done for him.

“Father, we must leave. There is no time to lose.”

“I will not be able to. Save yourself. Save your mother and as many as you can.”

Adamis looked around him. The fighting was chaotic, heart-wrenching. The casualties were piling up. Explosions and elemental missiles were coming from all sides. Rock and marble were exploding. The chamber was surely going to collapse. It would not withstand that kind of battering.

And at that moment, as if it were following hard on his heels, the lethal mist arrived. He looked up through the broken dome and saw the cloud pass over them, spreading out towards the Second Ring. Under its shadow the mist descended and penetrated every opening. A few moments later the entire chamber was enveloped in the poisonous substance. The fighting stopped. Warriors and Lords of both sides stared at the strange phenomenon in bafflement. The dampness and bitter taste reached Adamis once again. With heavy sorrow in his soul, he knew they were all doomed.

“I am sorry, Father…”

Laino seemed to read what the mist meant in his son’s gaze.

“Is it the end?”

“Yes, father,” he said helplessly.

“In that case, before I die I need to tell you a great secret.”

“You can trust me. Although nothing you might tell me matters any longer.”

“Even so, I want you to promise you will respect my wishes.”

“Always. Father, what are your desires?”

“You will bury me in my temple. I am the last of the Five High Kings. They are already resting in their temples. I too wish to rest there for all eternity.”

Adamis nodded repeatedly. “I will do that, Father. You have my word, I will take you there.”

“Thank you … now listen, it is important that you should know this. We, the Five High Kings, made a secret pact. A pact to live and rule forever. We built a great secret chamber where we spent a long time experimenting with hibernation. And after many failures, we finally succeeded. We discovered how to hibernate and come back revitalized, rejuvenated, able to rule for another thousand years. It took us an eternity, but in the end we succeeded. More than once, in our frustration at our failures, we came close to destroying the Chamber of Hibernation, but we did not give up. We completed the project. We took the technology to our funerary temples so that no one would suspect anything. We would be buried with all honors, but we would return.”

“I know this, Father…”

“You know? How is that possible?”

“I followed Asu the night of your last secret meeting. He was spying on you. He found out everything, and so did I.”

“That explains… many things.”

“Do not worry, I understand what you were trying to do. I never wanted to rule. I would have supported your plan.”

“Thank you… we swore an oath not to confide in our heirs, in our Houses. The greed of the Golden… the risk of betrayal… was too high.”

“Yes, I know. Among us it is boundless. I know that very well.”

“Exactly. That is why we decided not to trust our own people to bring us back in a thousand years once we were hibernating in our mortuary temples. Everybody was to believe we were dead. I created a system which would avoid our having to trust the Golden to wake us up when the day came.”

“A system? I do not understand…”

“Before I tell you, you must promise me you will not judge me.”

“I am no-one to judge your acts. How were you going to wake? Who would do it?”

“This will surprise you: slaves. Hybrids, to be precise.”

“Hybrids?” Adamis repeated incredulously.

“Yes. We experimented on them in the utmost secrecy. For a long time. Not even Notaplo knew. Hybrids with Power, the ones Notaplo called *an exceptional anomaly*, are really hybrids born of our seed, the seed of the Five High Kings.”

Adamis was shocked at this. He could not believe what his father was telling him.

“But… but that means… and those poor human women? I cannot believe it.”

“They did not suffer, I can assure you of that. The seed was implanted artificially. They were not even aware of it.”

“It is an outrage!” he cried, with Kyra’s image burning in his mind. “That does not make it acceptable!”

“No, but it was necessary. The women were none the worse for it, and they were taken good care of.”

“That is no excuse!”

“I knew you would not approve of it, which is why I never told you.”

“It is absolutely unacceptable! I do not understand how you could lend yourself to such an act, much less that it was your own idea!”

Laino gestured at the corpses of the warriors around them. “I was trying to avoid this.”

Adamis closed his eyes and shook his head. The wickedness of it overwhelmed him.

“You have to understand my reasons… a war between the Houses was approaching all the time. I wanted to prevent the death of thousands of our people.”

“Even so, Father… we are not Gods, even though we might have thought we were. We cannot play with the lives of those less powerful.”

Laino nodded, with tears in his eyes. “I see that now… I realize my mistakes… our arrogance… All my attempts, however well-intentioned, have failed. War has come, and it has destroyed us. Asu will lead his surviving Golden to a destiny of horror… I ask your forgiveness for what I have done.”

“It is not me whose forgiveness you need to ask. It is men, all the slaves.”

“It is too late for that. I need your forgiveness before I leave for my eternal rest. Forgive me, son, for this, for having condemned you, for all my mistakes…”

Adamis took a deep breath. He did not want to forgive him, since what he had done was unforgivable, an inexcusable abomination. But he was dying, and he loved his father. He felt he must grant him the rest he begged, even though he did not approve.

He took his father’s hand in his own. “You have my forgiveness.”

“The slave… Kyra…”

“Yes, father, tell me.”

“Her father was Oskas… he came of the seed of High King Gar, of the House of Fire.”

Adamis nodded. “I see. And Kyra’s mother?”

“Another Hybrid with Power. Born from the seed of Edan, of the House of Water.”

“Why allow the mixing?”

“The larger the number of descendants, the greater the guarantee that they would come to wake us on the appointed day. At this moment there are two generations of Hybrids with Power born of the seed of the five high kings. First there were five, now there are still very few of them, a dozen, but there will be more, for the seed will be passed along with the blood of men. In a thousand years there will be a good handful, and the strongest, the ones in which the Power is most latent, will answer the call. That is the system I created.”

Hearing this, Adamis thought of Albana. She too was a Hybrid with power.

“Albana. Which House?”

“Albana is of our House, the House of Ether.”

“Only that? She is not mixed?”

“She is pure.”

Adamis nodded.

“One more thing, my son,” He moved his hand to the Royal Medallion of Ether which hung at his neck. “This medallion is imbued with great

Power: not only mine, but that of every single one of our people. It represents the House of Ether, it is enchanted so that it will defend its bearer. To defend the High King in case his rest is perturbed. Only one worthy of our House can wear it. Each one of the Five High Kings has one, and they have been enchanted in the same way."

"I understand. I thought it was just a jewel, that its value lay in what it represented, in who it identified: the High King of the House."

"No, it is much more than that. Far, far more… it is very powerful."

"I see."

"Everything is written down in two sacred books: The Book of the Sun and the Book of the Moon. These Tomes are the key to the system I created. They look like mere log books of knowledge and facts: they contain a great deal of information about our civilization, our Temples and Portals, our Power and Abilities, our history and significant events up to this moment. But hidden among all that information is something more important… Whoever knows what to look for will be able to discover my system in them. In them I have stipulated the manner and the time for summoning the Hybrids to wake us."

"I understand… have you used hidden spells, as was done in the old times?"

"Exactly. Both books are enchanted. I used much of my Power for it. Everybody uses discs now, but I used the ancient methods."

"So these books are the key to understanding your system."

"The books and the Medallion of Shadows."

"The Medallion of Shadows? What does that do?"

"It watches from the shadows. It is enchanted and imbued with the Power of the Five High Kings. It will watch over our rest so that we run no risk. If we should do so, it will summon the Hybrids with Power so that they can act. It is the watcher which will prevent betrayal, or else some natural or chance disaster, before the day of awakening."

"I see you left nothing to chance."

"I was always good at thinking," he said regretfully, "although not good enough to save my people."

“Do not blame yourself. Nobody could have foreseen this.” Adamis was thoughtful. An idea began to take shape in his mind. An unlikely idea: surely it would not work. But perhaps… what could he lose? They were all doomed in any case. The enemy army attacking in front of them, the toxic cloud above and the Royal Portal which was not working. The idea took shape more strongly in the face of his despair. And who knew? Crazy though it might be, it could even work. *I will try it anyway. We are already dead. I have nothing to lose.*

“Where are they? How can I find them?” he asked urgently.

“They are hidden and guarded by three Guardians: The Guardian Priest of the Sun, the Guardian Priest of the Moon and the Guardian Priest of the Medallion… so that they do not end up in the wrong hands. I will tell you where… my strength is failing me…”

Adamis embraced him. Laino whispered the location to him.

“Are the three there now?”

“Yes. I sent them as soon as the attack began. I wanted them to be safe.”

“How can I use them? How can I find the hidden passages and spells?”

Laino explained, and with his last breath, the last trace of life left him and he died in his son’s arms.

“Thank you, Father,” Adamis said, and wept for his loss.

Part of the wall crumbled, and several Warriors of the House of Fire leapt in over the rubble, hurling fireballs as they came.

“Block the gap!” Teslo cried to his men. “Keep them back!”

Adamis called the Priest, who was waiting alert a few steps away.

“Take him and follow me. We will take him to his Funerary Temple, as was his wish.”

The Priest nodded and gently took his dead Lord in his arms.

“The High King is dead!” Teslo cried, and raised his sword.

All the Warriors and Lords raised their swords.

“Long live Adamis, the new High King of the House of Ether!” Teslo proclaimed.

“Long live Adamis!” they all shouted, and fell to their knees.

Adamis looked proudly at them. “Rise and fight, my faithful ones! For the House of Ether! To the death!”

“For the House of Ether! To the death!” they cried, and returned to the fight.

Adamis addressed his Champion, who was soaked in blood and sweat.

“Teslo, I need you to gain some time for me so that I can evacuate as many as possible.”

“At your command, my Lord.”

“It is not an order… it is a request…”

“You are my King. I live to do your bidding.”

“Thank you, Teslo, but you know what I am asking you.”

“Yes, your Majesty. I will give my life for my House. For that I was born, for that I became a Champion.”

“Thank you, Teslo,” Adamis said, and clasped the massive shoulders firmly. “Thank you.”

“Go, your Highness. We will hold out as long as we can.”

Adamis shot a last glance at his brave followers. All the Warriors and Lords still alive were fighting with all their Power. None of them would come out alive. He took a deep breath and exhaled. He had to go on; there was only the remotest of chances. Followed by the Priest, he headed off towards the palace cellars.

“Where are we going, your Highness?”

“To the First Erudite’s chamber of knowledge.” *To Notaplo’s chamber.*

Once in the crystalline chamber, he smiled at the countless memories it brought back to him. Beside the House of Ether’s translucent monolith of knowledge, he saw two Erudites. These were Notaplo’s disciples.

“Come closer,” he called.

“Yes, your Majesty,” said the elder of the two. “How may we be of service in this grave hour of need?”

“When I was a little boy, Notaplo let me play with him here.”

“I remember, your Majesty.”

“Then perhaps you may remember that Notaplo let me “escape and explore the world”?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“Do you know how he did that? Could you replicate it?”

“I believe I could, your Majesty. My master endowed the monolith with this capacity. It has its own source of Power so that its use would not be detected. It is a secret known to very few.”

“Luckily I know it, and I can remember it. We are going to “escape and explore”.”

The Erudite nodded and began to operate the controls of the monolith.

Adamis turned to the other Erudite. “You: go to the Royal Chamber and look for the Queen Mother. Tell her to bring all the survivors here. Quickly. The enemy is about to break our last defense.”

“Right away, your Majesty.”

Adamis gazed at his Father’s dead body in the Priest’s arms.

“We will give him the royal rest he deserves.”

“Where, your Majesty?” the first Erudite asked.

“My Father’s funerary temple.”

The Erudite nodded again and went back to working on the monolith. Brilliant golden lights in the form of rings ran along its surface. Suddenly, with the monolith in the middle, as if it were part of it, there took shape a golden sphere, six feet high. A moment later it was filled with something like liquid silver.

“It is active, your Majesty,” the old Erudite said.

The Portal gave out flashes of silver.

“Priest, do you know your duty?”

“Yes, your Majesty. I am a Guardian Priest. I will watch over my Lord’s rest. Nobody and nothing will ever disturb it.”

Adamis bowed to the Priest, who crossed the Portal with the dead King in his arms.

“Goodbye, Father…” Adamis murmured. He felt a great void and a pain in his chest. He put his hand to it and remembered the Royal Medallion of Ether. It had gone with his father. He thought of going to get it back, but there was no time. He had to save his mother and the others. If he ever needed it again he knew where to find it: in his father’s coffin in his

funerary temple. He wondered whether the other High Kings had been buried with their jewels. *Yes, they must have been. That is what they planned, and that is how they will have been buried: with their medallions, in their Funerary Temples, with their Guardian Priests. Except that they will not return from eternal sleep as was their wish. None of them. The plan did not work. I am sorry, Father.*

He turned back to the old Erudite.

"I want you to create another Portal. The biggest and most powerful you can."

"Very well, your Majesty, but it will use up all the Power of the Chamber of Knowledge. We will not be able to use it again."

Adamis nodded. "It is a one-way journey. There will be no return. There will be no more journeys for us."

"Very well. I will get it ready. It will take me some time."

"Hurry. Once they are all here, we must go."

The refugees started to arrive. Golden from the Houses of Water and Ether filled the corridors and the chamber of knowledge. After them waited the Golden of the Houses of Earth and Air. When the Queen Mother came to Adamis he told her what had happened to his father Laino. Her eyes filled with tears and she knelt before her son.

"Long live the new High King of the House of Ether," she said with bowed head.

"Mother, it is not necessary…"

"But it is," she said. "I, as Queen Mother, kneel before you and swear fealty to you, my son and new High King." All watched this, then they too knelt. Adamis was impressed.

"Please stand, I beg you." He took his mother's hands and helped her up. "Are they all here?"

His mother's eyes were filled with a deep sadness. "All those we could gather together. There are not many of them. The others are dead."

Adamis sighed. "It is all we can do."

He turned to the old Erudite. "Is it ready?"

"Yes, my Lord."

“Activate it.”

The Erudite operated the monolith of knowledge, and an enormous portal formed around the artifact. A golden ring held it. Inside it the silver surface which formed it began to vibrate and flash. The translucent monolith was transferring its Power to the Portal.

“Forward! Everyone! Through the Portal!” Adamis ordered them.

The surviving Golden of the four houses began to cross, with Adamis spurring them on to go faster. They did not have much time. The forces of Asu’s army were on the point of entering. The last refugees crossed the Portal, and Adamis insisted that his Erudites cross before he did so himself.

He heard a terrible explosion from the floor above, and knew that his people had died. The last line of defense had fallen. His Mother was waiting in front of the portal.

“Cross now, Mother.”

“Where are you taking us?”

Adamis took her hand and smiled. “To a secret place, to try something impossible.”

And they went through the Portal. Adamis’s last thought before leaving Alantres forever was of Notaplo. *Thank you, my old friend.*

Chapter 38

Kyra stared out desolately at the battlefield. Thousands upon thousands of men and women of all five races had lost their lives. In the midst of the clamor of the fighting she had not realized how many casualties they had suffered. At the sight of the plain in front of the New Shelter, covered in corpses, her soul wept.

Albana tried to cheer her up. “You have to just think that we’ve won.”

“I do, but the price we’ve paid is overwhelming.”

Albana nodded. “It makes your heart sink, I know. But nobody thought we’d be able to defeat the Golden, and we did. The slaves have defeated the all-powerful Gods.”

“Thousands have sacrificed themselves so that we could make it.”

“And that makes them real heroes. They knew most of them wouldn’t survive, and yet not one of them stepped back.”

Tears filled Kyra’s eyes. “I know, we owe them our freedom.”

“And we’ll always remember that.”

The two friends embraced.

Ikai, who was organizing the transport of the wounded, came over to where they were standing.

“I’ve spoken with the leaders of each People, those who have survived. We’re organizing the care of the wounded and the search for supplies. Night will fall soon, and we need blankets and food.”

All of a sudden Kyra’s bracelet began to flash. They watched an image taking shape before them amid a mist. A moment later Kyra recognized who it was.

“Adamis! Are you all right, my love?”

Yes. Do not worry, little shrew, the new High King of Ether said. *And how are you all?* he asked with real concern.

“We survived. With massive casualties, but we defeated the army sent by the Golden.”

Adamis stared at her in astonishment. *You defeated them? That … it is … incredible. You never cease to amaze me.*

“I’ll tell you everything when we’re together. When will I see you?”

Adamis’s face turned somber. *Well, my love, the situation is very complicated. That is why I am communicating with you.*

“What’s happening?”

Are Ikai and Albana with you?

“Yes, we’re here.”

Good. I will explain what has happened.

He went on to tell them everything he had been through: the war between the Houses, the betrayals, the death of the High Kings, the fall of all the Houses, the appearance of the House of Hila and the triumph of the House of Fire. Then he explained what Aruma and the Children of Arutan had done.

Kyra shook her head, unable to believe what he was telling them. “It’s impossible!”

Ikai was equally shocked. “What they’ve done is completely insane.”

“I can’t believe they’ve gone so far with their radical ideals.”

Believe me. They are going to kill all the Golden and create a new Rebirth.

“But Aruma would never betray us, she’s our friend. She helped us. We defeated the army of the Golden thanks to her and her weapons.”

Yes, but she follows her own goals, and nothing is going to stop her. The poisonous cloud has spread over the whole Eternal City. No Golden is going to survive. It continues expanding as we speak. It is on its way to the mainland and will soon reach you.

Kyra shook her head vigorously. “I refuse to believe it. It can’t be, she’s not crazy enough to do anything like that.”

“Do we need to be afraid of this cloud?” Albana asked.

No, it only affects the Golden.

Kyra suddenly realized what he was saying. “And you?” she cried. “Tell me you haven’t been infected. Tell me you’re at a safe distance from it. You are, right?”

Adamis shook his head slowly. *We are all infected. We will die tomorrow evening.*

“Nooooo! Nooooo!” Kyra cried in despair, and burst into passionate weeping. “I can’t lose you a second time! Noooooo!”

“There must be something we can do,” Ikai said.

Thank you, Ikai… I do not think so…

Albana narrowed her eyes. “You said it yourself, we’re unbelievable, we have to be able to do something. We’ll help you in any way we can.”

I have a plan…

“A plan?” Kyra stopped weeping at the prospect of new hope.

Yes. It is crazy, but we are going to try…

“We…?”

Yes. I have taken all the poisoned refugees to a secret temple. We are all there now.

“We’ll help you,” Kyra said eagerly.

It is not safe for you. The Golden are still at war.

“I don’t care, we’ll help you!” Kyra insisted. And Ikai nodded. “Of course we will.”

“You need us,” Albana added.

Finally Adamis gave in. *Very well… I will send you the location of the secret temple I am in. Bring out the map I gave you.*

The three used their discs, and Adamis marked the place. He gave them the combination of runes needed to activate the portal and reach the temple.

“What is this secret temple?” Ikai asked.

It is the secret Hibernation Chamber of the Five High Kings.

It took them all night to reach the secret temple. They finally arrived at dawn after making part of the journey on foot, part of it using the Golden Portals. It took them some time to recalibrate the last of these so that it would lead them to Adamis. The Five High Kings had made sure that the combination of runes needed to reach the place could never be activated by accident. It was three times more complicated than that of a normal leap to another temple.

They emerged from the portal in the underground temple and went forward into a strange ante-chamber. The room was round, with shining black walls. The ceiling, also black as night, was carved with an unknown constellation, which shone brightly as if they were outside looking up at the night sky. Inside they found a great round door, sealed from the other side. The door was full of Golden symbols, and in the center was a strange round gap, like a keyhole.

Ikai bent close to it. “A big disc or a round jewel would fit in here…”

Kyra pointed to the center of the chamber. “Look, how strange…”

A marble dais dominated the chamber. On it two large squares were carved: one decorated in gold, the other in silver.

“It looks like an altar,” Ikai said.

Albana took a closer look at it. “It looks as though it was made to fit two large books.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. “I feel Power. It’s imbued with Power. It has some specific purpose.”

Suddenly the round door opened.

It is to shut this chamber, came a friendly voice.

“Adamis! My love!” Kyra hurled herself into the Golden’s arms with such impetus that he felt an intense pain in his side.

Argh…

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I was so looking forward to seeing you,” she murmured, and smothered him with kisses and caresses.

Adamis smiled. *It has been a long time without seeing you, little shrew. Too long.*

The two lovers fused into an embrace so deep and intense that it looked as if it would swallow them up, body and soul. Ikai and Albana shared in the joy of the reunion. Then Adamis hugged them both fondly. They

exchanged hugs and greetings, like true friends and comrades. For a moment the suffering, the war, death, everything, was left behind them and the four young people enjoyed the happiness of meeting again after such a long time and so many tribulations. Kyra and Adamis embraced again and devoured each other with eyes filled with passion. It took them some time to break away from each other. Neither wanted to leave the other's arms.

Adamis led them to the inner chamber through a long narrow corridor.

This is the Hibernation Chamber, he announced.

And what they saw left them speechless. The chamber was round and very large. The floor and the ceiling formed two golden rings. The walls were slightly concave, and golden. Floor and ceiling were translucent. A huge transparent golden sphere with Golden symbols carved all along its surface was spinning above a solid silver pedestal, with a purring sound. But if the chamber was surprising, what was going on in it was even more so. A dozen dead Golden lay on one side. With the aid of a Healer one of the Erudites was examining a Golden as he lay on a marble table, still alive.

"Has it already begun?" Kyra asked uneasily.

Adamis made a reassuring gesture. *No, these are volunteers.*

"For death?" Albana asked in puzzlement.

Erudites and Healers have tried to fight the toxin. They have tried to purge the body, but without success. They have also tried to attack it with the Power, but that turned out to be even more harmful. The more Power the body uses, the faster the toxin spreads through it, killing it in a matter of moments.

"And using Power from outside?" Albana asked. "I mean, not the patient's?"

You mean another person's Power?

She nodded.

The toxin divides and multiplies. Every time a Healer tries to heal using his or her Power, the toxin replicates and death comes more quickly.

"Damn you, Aruma! Why?" Kyra muttered.

Ikai pointed to the still-living Golden. "And this one?"

He is alive, but barely. And that gives us hope. Knowing that the toxin and the Power are related, we have tried the process the other way round.

We have reduced the use of Power in the body to the minimum, to a thread that holds on to life, nothing more. He is alive, but his body is not functioning. Erudites and Healers have established that in this state the advance of the toxin is almost stopped. Their conclusion is that it spreads via the use of the Power our bodies create.

"Fascinating," said Albana.

"Twisted and insane," Kyra protested.

"That's why it only affects the Golden, not men," said Ikai.

Exactly.

"What have you thought of doing?" Kyra asked.

Adamis told them the plan: *The idea came to me when my father revealed his secrets to me during his final moments. You see, the Five High Kings built this chamber to develop the technology of hibernation. They succeeded in the end. The chamber, I am told, is completely functional. More than that, it is so big that it has room for all the refugees.*

"I don't understand what you want to do," said Kyra.

There is no antidote for Aruma's poison. We will all die when the sun sets today. The toxin is already spreading through our bodies…

Ikai interrupted him: "But in hibernation… you slow down the advance of the poison…" He looked at the Golden patient, realizing what Adamis meant to do.

That is the idea. Hibernation slows down all the bodily functions until they almost cease altogether. It is as if the body were switched off. Time, in terms of the body, practically stops. And the same thing happens to the Power the body consumes, it reduces it to the minimum that can sustain it.

Albana nodded. "In that case the toxin will stop spreading at the present rate and change to an almost imperceptible one. It might work…"

"But until when?" Kyra asked.

Adamis sighed. *The Erudites have assured me that all natural toxins die with the passage of time. We only need to wait for long enough for that to happen. They are working on a way of measuring it. As long as there is still venom in the body, hibernation will continue. When the measuring device registers that no trace of the toxin is left, hibernation can be stopped and those asleep can be wakened.*

“How long?” Kyra asked again.

I am afraid it will be a long time… Adamis said. His voice sounded defeated.

“How long?” Kyra insisted, her gaze steady.

As far as they have been able to study the toxin and its longevity, bearing in mind the way it works on our bodies, it will take about three thousand years to die out.

Kyra stepped back as if she had been hit with a club. “Three thousand years! We’ll all have died, everything will have died!”

Adamis nodded. *The toxin has a long life, Aruma has ensured that nobody will be able to outlive it. When the body is in hibernation the whole process is slowed, so that the lifetime of the toxin is lengthened as well. Unfortunately the thing which saves us is the same thing which obliges us to wait for so long.*

Ikai considered this carefully. “That makes sense. Your plan ought to work. It’s a matter of waiting for the toxin to die during hibernation.”

“For it to die before it kills you,” Albana put in.

It is a crazy idea, I know, Adamis said. *But there is no other way, and we have no more time left.*

“I’m not going to lose you again!” Kyra cried furiously.

There is no other solution. It is either that, or dying when night falls. The toxin is in my body, it will kill me.

“No! There has to be another way!”

I am sorry, little shrew, but there is not.

Kyra hammered on his chest with her fists, tears running down her cheeks. “I can’t lose you!”

Be strong. As long as you live you will know I am down here with my people, where I belong.

Kyra burst into tears, and he tried to comfort her. They came together in a desperate embrace. Adamis kissed away her tears.

I love you, my little shrew.

“And I love you, with all my soul. That’s why I’m coming with you!”

He stared at her blankly.

“I’m going to hibernate with you!”

Adamis moved a little away from her and stared into her eyes. *You cannot! It has only been tested on Golden. We have no idea what effect hibernation would have on your body.*

“I’m half-Golden, don’t you forget that. I’m a hybrid with Power.”

Even so, it is too dangerous. I cannot risk your life.

“It’s my decision.”

No, Kyra, not this time. The decision is mine. I decide who hibernates, and the answer is no. I will not risk your life without a reason. You can live a full life here, with your people. He looked at Ikai and Albana, who made no attempt to speak. *You can fall in love again, have a family, be happy. You only have to leave me down here, knowing that I will be thinking of you forever.*

“Let me come with you, Adamis.”

He shook his head. *No. My decision is final.*

Kyra protested and cursed furiously, but he remained firm. He would not risk his beloved’s life. Seeing she was not calming down, Albana took her to one side and tried to make her see reason. Adamis looked at Ikai, who nodded gratefully.

“Where are the rest of your people?” he asked the Prince.

Adamis pointed to the floor. Through the crystalline surface they could see the Golden in hibernation. They were floating in the lower chamber in a strange golden substance. The image left him speechless. It looked as though they were sleeping in the midst of a sea of golden water.

They have all gone in now. They did not want to lose a single moment in case the toxin accelerated its working. Only the Erudites remain. He gestured below. Beside the great sphere five Erudites were working tirelessly. Adamis waved at them. Time was running out, and they were finishing their preparations.

They will work until the very last moment. Then they will go into hibernation themselves. They will be the last.

“I see,” said Ikai.

I need you to seal the chamber when you leave. And then secure the temple. Nobody must ever find out that we are down here. Not now, not ever.

“We’ll make sure of that,” Ikai said. “Don’t worry. Nobody will disturb your rest.”

Adamis thanked him warmly. *If the hibernation is interrupted, the toxin will continue its advance and we will all die.*

“I’ll watch over your sleep.” Albana promised him. “And when my time comes I’ll make sure that others go on with the task in secret.”

They will help you seal the chamber, Adamis said, and showed them the Three Guardian Priests who were waiting stoically in the shadows, at the end of the chamber.

“Who are they?” Ikai asked.

Guardian Priests, whose mission is to preserve the Tomes of the Sun, the Moon and the Medallion of Shadows which seal this chamber. I will explain everything before I go into hibernation myself, but know that you are not alone, that they will watch and protect the process of hibernation. Thus my father planned it. I have also manipulated the medallion so that the summons, the awakening, will occur when we are free of the toxin, not before.

“Very well.” Ikai was looking closely at the Priests, who with their white hooded robes, hidden in the dark, looked more like spirits of the shadows.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Adamis said with a small bow. *I know it is too much to ask you, to ask Men to protect the Golden from extinction, but that is the point we have reached.*

“Surely things have turned round,” Kyra said with narrowed eyes. “If it weren’t because you’re going in there yourself…”

“Kyra…” Ikai knew it was her rage talking, not her heart. “We’re not going to commit genocide, nobody’s going to. You have my word of honor, Adamis. The secret of the Golden will be safe with us.”

The new High King of Ether nodded in acknowledgement.

“Who would have guessed it, us saving the Golden,” said Albana. “Fate never ceases to surprise us.”

“Fate, and the actions of Golden and Men,” said Ikai.

Very true, said an arrogant, condescending voice behind them. *Although there is still one final surprise that will put things back to where they should be.*

They turned, and the blood froze in their veins. In the ante-chamber, on the other side of the corridor, Asu, High King of Fire, was waiting. Beside him, his cousin Lord Erre and Iradu, the Champion of the House of Fire.

Chapter 39

They were watching them from the ante-chamber, in the shadows of the dark hall.

Asu! Adamis cried, and all the muscles in his body tensed.

Surprise! Asu said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. *My dear friend Adamis, how delightful to find you alive. Are you not happy to see me?* He gave a triumphant giggle.

Adamis was assessing the situation in his mind. *Absolutely not.*

"You bastard!" shouted Kyra. "I'm going to gouge your eyes out!"

Albana unsheathed her black daggers and got ready to attack. Ikai glanced at her, warning her to wait and see how things developed. Adamis seized Kyra by her waist as she hurled herself toward Asu.

As rude as ever, he said. *I will make sure you get what you deserve, slave. I have been wanting to do so for a long time, a long, long time* (he savored the words as he spoke) *and at last my wish is to be granted.*

Adamis moved to stand in front of Kyra. *You will not lay a finger on her.*

Asu grinned and tilted his head in amusement. *Shall we come in, or would you rather come out to welcome us?*

The ante-chamber and the chamber of hibernation were separated by a long passage. Adamis had no desire to risk either the chamber or the lives of those in it. He gestured to Ikai and Albana to come forward.

We are coming out, he said, and they went as far as the door of the ante-chamber.

What a long time it has been since we met, Asu said, his fiery eyes fixed on Adamis. *I see you are still keeping the same bad company that led you to your doom. But wait… you were executed by your Father… you ought to be dead… what a disappointment. You can see how it is always better to deliver justice with your own hands.* He was looking at Lord Erre as he said

this, and his cousin nodded. *You tricked me. That is not good at all, Adamis, not good at all.*

What are you doing here? How did you find us?

I was deeply disappointed when I reached the royal chamber in your father's palace and found it deserted. Well, of the living, at least. Corpses everywhere. My informers had assured me that the survivors of the other houses had taken refuge there. I was going to teach them that no-one can escape from my power. He gave a twisted smile. *I came intent on teaching them a final lesson. I was going to skin them and then incinerate them while still alive, all of them … well, not all. I was going to let a couple live so that they would remember the lesson. But somebody robbed me of the satisfaction of my final victory.* Now his eyes gleamed with fury.

"You're a despicable murderer!" Kyra cried.

Slave, nobody addressed you. Hold your tongue and listen to your betters.

"I'm going to cut you open!" she shouted.

Adamis saw that Iradu had taken a step forward and Erre had unsheathed his fiery sword. *Stay calm,* he said.

As I was saying before the slave interrupted us, Asu said patronizingly, *all I found were corpses. Your Father's was not among them…although my spies assure me that he died. In the end the old man was not as clever as he thought.* He laughed.

Adamis tensed and bit his lip in an effort to contain himself.

We also found your Champion's dead body. He fought well to the end, did he not, Iradu?

With honor to the end, like a true Champion, Iradu agreed solemnly.

Yes, yes… but something did not fit: where were all the refugees? I thought they might have escaped to the mainland, but my Erudites informed me that the city portals were not working. So I searched the palace from top to bottom. And we found the Portal in the chamber of knowledge. What was the name of the Erudite I caused to be killed? Nota… something…

Notaplo, Erre said.

Ah, yes, Notaplo. An intelligent Erudite. A pity he had to die.

Adamis clenched his fists, holding back the rage burning in his stomach. *You will pay for all the deaths you have caused.*

“Let me kill him,” Kyra pleaded. Her eyes were moist with fury.

Adamis was doing his best to avoid confrontation. *Stay calm.…*

Yes, stay calm, we would not want that nature of yours to catch fire… you know how much I relish burning slaves.… As I was saying, we found the Portal. My Erudites examined it and established that it was about to disappear. We had no time to do anything. The three of us crossed a moment before it vanished. Which was a pity. I would rather have made a more triumphant entrance with my whole army behind me, but what could one do? It was not meant to be. Although I really think that even so, it was dramatic enough, was it not? Just when you were thinking you had escaped. His *laughter was hollow and mocking.*

Your army is trapped in Alantres and will not be able to leave, Adamis said. *The Portals do not work. They will all die this evening.*

Yes. That, to be precise, is the other matter that has brought me here. The arrogant, mocking expression vanished, giving way to one of rage and frustration. *The toxic cloud which has enveloped the whole Eternal City… which has covered us all… my Erudites say it is poisonous, that we are all infected and will die before nightfall. Even that lunatic Moltus confirms it, he says the voices have told him the end of days has come for the Golden and that all we can do is wait and die. The fool used poison to end his life so as not to suffer what is coming. As you can imagine, that is something I cannot allow to happen. And from what I was able to hear, you have already found the solution to that very pressing problem.…*

Did you hear it all?

Enough of it. So this is the chamber where the old fools developed their technology of hibernation? My dear father did not tell me his secrets before I killed him. He gave a grimace of pretended sorrow. *I imagine yours, on the other hand, told you before he died, which benefits all of us.*

What do you want?

Simply: this chamber.

We do not need to fight for it, Adamis said. He was still trying to avoid bloodshed. *We can share it.*

Asu gave an abandoned laugh. *Share? I do not share anything. The chamber is mine now.*

You can hibernate with the others.

Do you really think I am going to trust you? That I am going to trust these slaves to keep the secret of my rest? If you really believe that, you must be out of your mind.

“We will keep your bodies like those of the others,” Ikai said in support of Adamis. “You have nothing to fear as long as you’re in hibernation. You have my word.”

Asu laughed again. *His word, the slave says. Your word has no value for me, any more than your life does.*

“Don’t waste time,” Albana put in. “He has no intention of leaving us alive.”

You are a Shadow, I remember you. Oskas’ disciple, are you not?

“You let my mother die, and you’ll pay for it,” she said. “I swore revenge, and I’m going to have it.”

Asu laughed. *Ah yes, I seem to remember you dared to ask me to save her… that you, a vulgar slave, should dare ask me!*

Think about it, Asu, Adamis said. *The toxin is spreading through your body. You are going to die. We are going to die. There is no need to fight. We can still save ourselves. We only have to go into the chamber and go into hibernation, all of us.*

There was a tense silence. Asu’s eyes were fixed on Adamis. After a moment he straightened, then spread his arms wide, palms open.

It is all mine. The Golden are mine. This world is mine. It has taken me time and effort, but today I have achieved it. At last I have conquered all the Houses. It is all mine! The Eternal City, this continent, Golden, slaves: everything! I am not going to give it up now that it is within my reach. His eyes shone with greed, and his mouth was twisted in a dark smile. And in any case, killing you is the cherry on the cake. Nothing could give me greater satisfaction before the long journey than to kill you with my own hands. Especially you two: the arrogant prince of ether and his insubordinate slave. I will hibernate with your heads under my arm!

Adamis raised his protective sphere. He was the quickest to do so. An instant later Asu sent a ball of fire at him. Adamis's sphere protected Kyra, who was still raising her own.

"I'll kill you!" she cried in fury.

Iradu activated his silver spear and bracelet-shield in a single movement by shaking both arms. With an explosion of fire he leapt onto Ikai, covering the distance that separated them in a heartbeat. Ikai rolled to one side to avoid being impaled by the silver spear, which was now flaming.

Erre lit his sword of fire, and with his other hand he hurled a fiery missile in the form of a spear at Albana. She used her Power and vanished into the shadows of the ante-chamber. The fiery spear went through the dark mist she left behind her without reaching her.

I will reduce you to ashes! Asu shouted. He attacked with unusual rage and aggressiveness, products of the intense hatred he felt towards his rivals and the fury which was devouring him. He hurled great fireballs against Adamis and Kyra which struck their defensive spheres one after the other and burst into sheets of flame. The explosions were so powerful that they weakened the defensive spheres and violently shook their bodies.

Adamis and Kyra were standing up to the attack, their minds focused on sending Power to the spheres to prevent them collapsing. Adamis tried to counterattack, but the rough treatment his body was receiving would not let him use his Power as he wished. Meantime Asu attacked, using vast quantities of Power like a madman, striking like a maniac.

I will roast you alive! You will die writhing in pain in my flames!

Kyra dug her feet in firmly and clenched her jaw. Taking hold of her disc, she hurled an ethereal spear against Asu. The brightness of the white light of the disc in her hand alerted him, giving him time to raise a protective sphere of solid lava. The spear struck this, knocking flakes off it, but failed to penetrate it.

You stupid slave! You think yourself a rival for a God? You are slow and clumsy!

"You're no God! You're just a despicable golden! I'll gouge your eyes out!"

Asu gave a sneering laugh. *For you, you filthy slave, and for all your people, I will always be a God! The Highest God!*

The Lord of Fire pronounced words of Power, and a form began to take shape behind him. Adamis and Kyra took advantage of the moment to attack: Adamis with an intense beam of ether which he kept above a point in the lava sphere, trying to drill through it, and Kyra creating a ball of ether, like those of fire, and hurling it at Asu. The ball burst on contact, producing an explosion of energy. But it did not succeed in destabilizing Asu, who had by now finished creating the fiery form. This took the shape of an immense bird in flames. It rose, shook its wings and glided above Adamis and Kyra. With a fiery croak it opened its beak. Instantly a long flame issued from the beak, part fire, part lava, and fell on the couple. The bird turned and passed over them again, scattering everything in its path with burning lava.

Adamis interrupted Kyra's attack on Asu. *Strengthen the sphere!* he warned her, He attacked the great bird, and she followed his example.

Ikai got to his feet with Adamis's disc in his left hand. With his right he unsheathed his sword. Iradu charged at him with breathtaking speed and force, sliding his feet over a cloak of lava that formed as he passed, as if he were sliding on ice. Ikai saw the gigantic golden warrior hurling himself at him, and for a moment his blood ran cold. But he recovered, using the disc to surround himself with a sphere. It could not protect him completely from the impact; he felt a massive and painful shock and the next moment he was thrown against the rock wall of the chamber. With the impact he felt another shock, together with a stabbing pain throughout his body.

That sphere is effective against a Lord, Iradu said, as if he were teaching one of his beginner Warriors a lesson, *but it will not protect you from a Warrior in a hand to hand fight.* He took a great leap, and with a movement of his spear in mid-flight he hurled a trident of fire, which buried itself in the sphere. Ikai suffered another abrupt shock, which nearly brought him to his knees.

The massive Warrior raised his spear, ready to strike again. Ikai rolled to one side and the spear hit the wall. Immediately Iradu struck backwards with his shield, catching Ikai's sphere as he rolled. The strength of the blow drove him with an impact against the wall. He was left stunned.

Iradu aimed his fiery silver spear at him. *You are agile, and I see you can fight. But you will not be able to avoid me for much longer.*

Ikai took advantage of the moment and used the disc's Power. He was afraid he would not be able to in that state, but he summoned a Spirit of Agony. He gasped as he saw his nightmare creation materialize. Translucent gray, in a ragged robe and lacking any flesh, it looked at Iradu with a twisted face of horror. The Champion readied himself, and Ikai gave the order: "Attack!" The spirit gave a hollow moan and fell on Iradu.

The giant thrust his shield in front of the Spirit of Agony to protect himself. With his fiery spear he began to attack the ghost, which cried out at contact with the fire in its attempt to reach the Champion's flesh.

With a shadowy slither, Albana emerged from the half-darkness behind Erre. She used her Power to strengthen the blow she was getting ready to strike. A black flash appeared and covered her arms. Erre felt Power being used behind him and began to turn. With both daggers she struck the lava sphere which protected him. On their impact, fragments of the sphere flew into the air. Two marks were clearly visible where she had struck.

Erre had turned fully by now. *Treachery!* he shouted angrily, and with an undulating movement of his arm he sent a wave of flames toward Albana. She retreated with a pirouette, somersaulting backwards with amazing flexibility. When she had completed her move she saw the wave of lava sweeping the floor in her direction. It moved as though it were a wave of the sea six feet high, with the horrible difference that it was made of flames and was burning everything in its path.

A moment before the wave would reach her she used her Power to leap up to the ceiling, then hurled two daggers of power at Erre. Seeing this, he hurled a fireball at her. Daggers and fireball crossed in midair. The impact of the daggers reached Erre in his protective sphere, and he cursed as a whole layer of protection bounced. But his confidence was unchanged, and he watched to see the ball of fire finish her. The sphere flew towards her in the dome. A blackness enveloped her, and the fiery sphere passed through where she had been. It struck the ceiling and burst into flames.

Curse you! You cannot avoid all of my attacks. I am a Lord of the House of Fire. My power is a hundred times greater than yours, Shadow!

Albana said nothing, but appeared behind him and struck in the same spot as before. Pieces of the solid lava sphere flew off it. But Erre was ready to counterattack. He surrounded himself with a sphere of fire, whose

flames licked Albana's hands and arms. With a cry of pain she moved back into the shadows.

One of Asu's enormous fireballs came rushing along the corridor behind Adamis, but he used his Power to deflect it into the chamber of hibernation. It exploded against one of the walls, creating a sea of flames which reached two of the Erudites, who were burned to death. The Healers could do nothing for them. Seeing that the chamber would soon catch fire and everything would be lost, Adamis summoned the Guardian Priests.

Protect the chamber! Do not let the fire damage it!

The three Priests, who were waiting at the end of the chamber, moved to the entrance at his call. The first carried the Tome of the Moon in one hand and a Staff of Power in the other. The second carried the Tome of the Sun and a similar Staff. The third wore the Medallion of Shadows on his chest. They came to stand side by side, filling the entire width of the door, a couple of steps behind Adamis. They murmured words of Power and created three protective barrier-walls in front of them, blocking the whole entrance from floor to ceiling-dome. The fireballs and combat missiles now crashed against the barriers and failed to reach the chamber of hibernation.

While Iradu fought the Spirit of Agony, Ikai used the Power of the disc to create two more Spirits to protect him. The first was a Spirit of Pain. Similar in appearance to that of Agony, its face showed a terrible pain instead: the same pain it caused its enemies. Ikai pointed to Iradu, who had just destroyed the Spirit of Agony. "Defend me!" he said. The ghost took up position on his right and began to send missiles made up of essence of pain at the champion. With the first impact Iradu felt a terrible pain and was forced to stop. With the third impact, the pain was so unbearable that his knees bent.

Concentrating hard, Ikai created the second ghost: a Spirit of Death. The ghost moved to his left, floating inside its ragged robe with a grim expression of insatiable hunger. Ikai pointed to the weakened Champion. "Feed!" he ordered. The spirit threw itself on Iradu. With every blow, it robbed him of life while the spirit itself grew more powerful. The Champion roared in pain. He protected himself behind his shield and caused it to burn. The Spirit of Death moved away from it and tried to attack from the side. Iradu moved his shield and thrust his fiery spear at it. This time it was the Spirit of Death which roared as it was hit. But when the

shield moved, the Champion left himself open to attack by the Spirit of Agony. Several missiles of essence of pain reached him. He was left weakened, and his knees buckled again. Both Spirits attacked him voraciously.

Ikai felt he had a chance. But at that moment the champion made a movement with his spear and raised a wall of fire in front of him. It caught the Spirit of Death, which was forced to move back. Covering himself from the Spirit of Pain with the shield of fire, Iradu used his spear to kill the Spirit of Death. Ikai's hopes began to fade. Immediately Iradu created an explosion of fire under his feet. Propelled by the explosion, the champion shot to the ceiling. From there he hurled two fireballs against the Spirit of Pain which was protecting Ikai. The explosions destroyed the spirit and weakened the protective sphere. Ikai's hopes died completely as he saw the giant warrior falling on him. With a tremendous blow of his shield of fire Iradu sent Ikai against the wall amid flames, so that he was left lying on his back, winded. His head was bleeding, and his whole body hurt as if all his bones were broken.

You use your Power well, Hybrid. Those Spirits have weakened me. But you fight with a Disc, and that limits you. Do you not know how to use your own Power?

Ikai had lost his sphere and was dizzy. He got to his feet, holding Adamis' disc, and picked up his sword from the floor. At that moment he wished with all his heart that he could use his Power, but he had never managed to do it before and if he tried now he would be left exposed. He let out his breath abruptly. He knew the Champion was about to kill him, and nothing came to his mind which might save him.

On the other side of the chamber Albana came out of the shadows at amazing speed, zigzagging towards Erre. The Lord of Fire barely glimpsed a shadow slipping towards him. He attacked with two arrows of fire, which never touched her.

The Shadow launched five daggers of power as she completed her approach. Erre saw them and raised a defensive barrier of fire before him. But the Daggers, instead of flying in a straight line, curved to cross the defensive barrier and strike his defense. The Lord felt the five impacts on his sphere of lava, which by now was considerably weakened. He cursed.

The brunette dodged his fiery missile. With a shadowy leap she vanished in front of the wall of fire and reappeared behind him. She used her Power once more and struck the same spot on his sphere. He activated his sphere of fire and the flames spread around him, forming a ring of fire. She had expected this, and avoided it with a leap. But she did not manage to clear the fire completely, and it singed her legs. She fell to the floor and rolled over, groaning with pain.

You will never be able to break my defenses, Erre said. *My source of Power is immense.* He sent more power to strengthen his weakened sphere.

Albana was left lying on the floor. She bit her lip, holding back the intense pain, and did her best to recover from her injuries. The pain prevented her from using her power. Erre widened the ring of fire so that it advanced to devour her. The flames were about to bite into her flesh. In a final moment of desperation she attempted to use her power. The flames were no more than a finger's breadth from her face, so that she could feel their scorching heat. She grasped the disc from the shadows and used its Power instead of her own, which would not answer her. She called upon the Skill of Flight. At the contact of fire against her skin the shadowy skill activated itself. She was thrown away from the fire. Erre watched her with rabid anger.

Stop sneaking away like that! he demanded. *Fight and die!*

But she had already recovered from the pain. With her mind clearer now, she used her Power and vanished into the shadows.

Asu went on battering Kyra and Adamis without giving them a moment's respite. Adamis counter-attacked by creating a mist of death around Asu. The mist began to corrode his defense, but he created a sphere of fire and with it produced flames which burnt away the mist and destroyed it. He laughed and hurled a fiery javelin at Adamis.

"We're going to finish you off!" Kyra cried. She was hoping to deflect his attention from Adamis, who was getting the worst of the punishment. Asu stared at her with eyes that gleamed with hatred.

You are about to find out what true Power is!

He created an Elemental Flame. Six feet tall, the fiery creature was a voracious flame in the service of its master.

He pointed to Kyra. *Kill her!* he ordered. *I want her to burn!*

The Flame plunged forward to devour her. She took a step back and the creature of fire attacked her sphere, damaging it with every blow. She began to feel the heat of the flames through the sphere. She was suddenly afraid, but did not cower. She would not be beaten; she would fight. She armed herself with determination and attacked the flame.

While she was fighting the elemental creature of fire, Asu intensified his attack on Adamis. With words of Power, he created a flare in the shape of a Fiery Whirlwind which started spinning fast as it attacked Adamis, striking his sphere with intense flames. Adamis spread his arms wide and sent more Power to his protection. The fiery whirlwind spun around him, striking unpredictably at various points on the sphere.

You will beg for your lives on your knees! Asu roared. *And there will be no mercy! I will tear your hearts out of your burnt bodies!*

He moved his hands. A dozen apparently metallic spheres no bigger than an apple appeared and hovered before him, awaiting his orders. They shone with a strange mingling of black and orange. Suddenly he hurled them at great speed against Adamis. Each ball struck the sphere in the same spot, imploding on contact. Adamis felt a powerful shock, followed by another and yet another. With every impact his sphere weakened, and the shocks hurt his fragile body.

He took a couple of steps back. The power of the attacks, the fierceness of the flames and the scorching heat were beginning to take their toll on him. A terrible pain lashed his side and spread up his back. He was forced to crouch and breathe in deeply in an attempt to bear the pain.

Is this all that is left of the proud Prince of Ether? A cripple with a broken body, unable to defend himself? Asu's laughter was charged with malice and hatred. *I am going to enjoy every instant of crushing you!* He laughed again at the sight of Adamis bent over with pain.

He spread out his hands and intoned a long spell of power. A blackness appeared over Adamis, which gradually became a huge claw of fire. Adamis lifted his eyes and raised his arm, creating a shield to protect his head. The Claw of Fire closed over the sphere, seeking to crush it, and with it his head. At Asu's order the claw began to tighten, compressing his defensive sphere, exerting unbearable pressure, preventing him from moving, He was trapped, and the pressure was so strong that it broke through the barrier and his body writhed in pain.

Asu used an enormous amount of his power and gave more to the Claw of Fire. Finally the claw managed to tighten completely over the sphere and break it, upon which the claw was consumed in an explosion. Adamis was left lying on the floor writhing in pain, with part of his sides burning.

Asu saw his victory. *Yes!*

“Nooooo!” cried Kyra and thrust her body between the two to protect her beloved.

Nothing will save you, nor him either, Asu said. *Kill her!* he ordered his Elemental Flame.

His eyes on Ikai, Iradu passed judgment: *It is time to put an end to this duel. You have fought well, and I will give you a worthy death.*

Ikai used the disc and covered his sword with essence of death. Then he created a shield like Iradu’s, but of ether. If he must die, he would do so fighting.

Iradu gave a slight bow of recognition, and Ikai did the same. And they both attacked. They exchanged cuts and thrusts, defending themselves with their shields. Iradu’s strength was equaled by Ikai’s agility. But the skill of Iradu, the finest Warrior among the Golden, began to show. He attacked Ikai’s head with his fiery spear, and his opponent hid behind his shield. Then he launched a fireball, which unbalanced Ikai. But then something strange happened: green veins, swollen and putrid, began to appear along the mighty warrior’s arms and legs. He stopped and stared at them.

What is this? What is happening to me?

Ikai attacked, but Iradu defended himself with a sweep of his shield, heightened by his Power. Ikai was thrown down and left lying on his back, having lost both sword and disc.

Iradu took a step forward. And bent over in pain.

What is happening to me? What is happening to my body?

The veins were climbing up his neck and reaching his face. With a grunt he raised his spear and was about to transfix Ikai, who stretched his hand

toward his sword but could not reach it; it was three hand-spans away. He tried to seize the disc, but it too was too far away. The tip of the burning spear came down toward his chest. In despair, seeing death falling suddenly on him, he closed his eyes and visualized the sword in his mind. There was a white flash in his chest, and suddenly he felt the pommel of his sword in his hand. He opened his eyes. The tip of the spear was about to pierce his flesh, but he deflected it with the sword. He was unable to do so completely, and it buried itself in his side.

He doubled up with pain. In the midst of his agony he glimpsed Iradu's aura, which was giving out an intense amber light. He concentrated on it and trapped it. Iradu realized what he was trying to do and tried to protect his aura, but a spasm prevented him. The strange veins had spread throughout his body. Ikai fixed the aura firmly. Using his own Power he pulled down Iradu's head with his left hand, and as he bent it closer to him, with his right hand he buried his sword up to the hilt in the thick neck.

The giant dropped his spear and raised his hands to his sword. He staggered two steps back, his eyes staring wide. He fell to his knees and stared at Ikai.

You found… your Power… well fought…

He fell forward, dead.

Erre cursed. The Lord of Fire was surrounded by two rings of fire which he used his power to hold while at the same time he solidified his sphere of lava to defend himself. He had lost his patience.

He searched around vainly for Albana. *Show yourself!* he yelled.

She knew that the longer she kept the Lord of Fire on the defensive, the more Power he would consume. And no matter how great his source of Power might be, sooner or later it would run dry. The problem was to keep alive until that moment and keep him using up his Power. If she did not attack, he would stop using it up to reinforce his rings, and the sphere would hold. So she would have to act strategically. She was badly injured, with her arms and legs seriously burned. She was bearing the pain, but her strength was beginning to fail. *I'm not giving up. I'm going to get him. Whatever way I can.*

Erre sent more Power to keep up his defenses. Albana saw him curse, and as she watched him she noticed something strange. The Lord was

doubling up with pain. Swollen green veins were running through his body and up towards his face.

It was time to act. Erre recovered and hurled insults at her again.

Come out and show your face! You coward!

But that was not Albana's style. Her power and her skills had been developed to live in the shadows, attack with lethal precision and then vanish. She had been trained that way when she was a Shadow, and that was how she would fight. While Erre stared at his swollen and infected veins, baffled by what was happening to him, cursing, she was coming down from the ceiling on top of him. She moved silently, very slowly, using her Power, as though she were a gigantic and deadly spider.

Erre did not see her. He was turning green and having difficulty breathing. She was hanging upside-down above his head. She had avoided both rings of fire which defended him. Now only the solid lava sphere was left. She launched her attack, using her Power to deliver a savage blow. Erre felt the use of Power and looked up. When he saw Albana, his eyes widened. Her blow was directed to the exact spot where she had been weakening the sphere. Erre sent more Power to it. It held, but he doubled up in pain. Albana launched a new attack with her two daggers: the sting of the black spider. And this time Erre did not have enough Power to repel it. The defensive sphere shattered into a thousand pieces.

He raised his hands to launch a flare of fire at her, but she was faster. Both daggers gave a black flash and buried themselves in his eyes. He opened his mouth and gave a muffled cry. His arms dropped, his knees failed and he fell dead on the floor. She smiled in triumph, but her injuries overwhelmed her. She fell on top of Erre's body and lost consciousness.

Asu was ready to put an end to Adamis. Kyra, between the two of them, was fighting the Elemental Flame. She was losing. She would not be able to withstand the battering much longer. Through the translucent surface and the flames of that creature of maleficent fire she saw Adamis's body lying on the floor, badly injured and helpless. Inside her sphere the heat was so suffocating that she had to use more and more of her reserve of Power to prevent it penetrating her sphere and asphyxiating her. She was sweating profusely and beginning to feel she was slowly cooking inside her protection.

Asu moved his arms in a circle, creating a huge rock of fire on the floor. Suddenly he stopped. On his right arm swollen green veins had started to appear.

What is this? Nothing will stop me!

He turned to Adamis with a broad smile of pure satisfaction. The burning rock began to roll slowly, like a huge boulder on its way to crush them. The closer it came to them, the wider the smile on the Lord of Fire's face.

Kill that cowardly dandy!

The rock reached Kyra, who raised her hands in front of her to defend herself. But the rock, as it struck her sphere, pushed it aside with her inside it, leaving the way toward Adamis clear.

She realized that it was going to reach her beloved. "Noooooo!" she yelled.

The rock reached him, but it passed through him as his body turned to mist. This faded, while the rock continued on its way to die against the barrier the three Priests had created at the entrance of the chamber.

You cowardly swine! Stop fleeing! Fight and die like a Royal Golden!

Kyra sighed in relief. Adamis had become one with the mist and hidden himself. The flame reached her. She fended it off, but nothing seemed to affect that fiery creature. All her skills could not inflict enough damage on that infernal being.

Use… the Power of Water… Adamis's mental message reached her from somewhere behind her.

"Water?" she repeated blankly. The disc allowed her to use the Power of the element of Ether, because it was Adamis'. And her own Power, with the skills she had acquired, were based on that power, because she had learnt them with the disc. She had no idea how to use the Power of Water.

It is the only thing… that can defeat fire.

"But I can't…"

Yes you can… your mother… Solma…

"My mother?"

She was… the daughter of the High King of Water…

“What? What are you saying?

The Power of Water… is in your veins… use it…

“Mother? How?” She was deeply confused, did not understand. But she loved Adamis with all her being and trusted him as she did no-one else. She would follow his instructions.

She concentrated while she bore the attack and searched inside herself for her own Power. She found it. She could see it in her chest, and she used it. But she focused on creating water. She needed water and with it she could defeat Fire. But she was unable to. She tried again, more urgently, more furiously. Her defense was about to fall. Asu’s laughter and insults reached her as if he were spitting in her face. She closed her eyes, clenched her fists and focused on visualizing the element of water in her mind. The heat inside the sphere was suffocating, it was penetrating through, she could not keep it out. She was being roasted alive.

And she did it. A coolness, as if she were diving into the sea, enveloped her from head to foot. *Water, to fight fire,* she wished. At her order an Elemental of Water formed beside her. It was like the Elemental of Fire in shape and size, but made of water. It was as if a wave of the ocean had come to life. And at once it launched itself against the flame. Adamis had not been wrong; the Elemental of Water defeated the Flame of Fire.

Asu was beside himself with fury, seeing that Kyra was defeating his creation. *No!* he yelled. *You will pay for this*! With a movement of both arms he surrounded the water elemental with a ring of intense fire. But as he did so, his left arm began to fill with green veins.

What is this outrage? he cried. But this time his cry was not only of rage, it had an edge of worry.

Kyra wanted to free her elemental, but it took her too long to find how to do it. The intense heat of the ring turned the water to steam and destroyed her creation.

You are an amateur with a pathetic level of power! You will never defeat me, not in a thousand years!

She took a deep breath. She concentrated on Water, the Power she had inherited from her mother. She left Adamis’s disc on the floor and drew her throwing dagger. Her eyes fixed on Asu’s, she said: “I’m going to put an end to you.”

Using the Claw, he injected himself with the essence of life stored in the disc.

You can do nothing against me. I am more powerful and more intelligent, and I possess the most advanced technology.

At the sight of the Claw, she thought of the slaves in the pods.

“You can inject yourself with all the essence of life you want. It’s not going to save you. I’m going to make you pay for your crimes, for all those you’ve enslaved, exploited and murdered.”

You? A filthy slave? He burst into uproarious laughter.

“You killed my friends. Get ready to die.”

Asu laughed again, and his laughter echoed in the chamber. She attacked his sphere with a dozen stakes of ice. The stakes buried themselves in the protective lava sphere, passing through the sphere of fire which covered it. Asu gaped in amazement. She sent an ice javelin which struck violently and weakened his sphere. Blazing with rage, he counter-attacked with all his power, enveloping her in terrible flames. But as he did so, the putrid veins climbed through his body and reached his face. He doubled up in pain.

Noooooo! he yelled helplessly.

Kyra’s protective sphere collapsed. She found herself surrounded by flames which were licking her skin. Fear took possession of her in the midst of the pain. She saw herself lost. Asu was too strong for her. Her mother’s face came to her mind. She remembered her goodness, her strength, the sacrifices she had made to raise them, working from sunrise to sunset, sick, vomiting blood at the end of the day. And courage returned to her. “I won’t give up! I’ll get justice for her, for Yosane, Idana, Liriana, for all of them!”

Amid the inferno which surrounded her and the pain she was feeling, she managed to surprise herself by raising a sphere of ice around her body. This one was far stronger than the one of Ether. And she attacked, creating a storm of ice above Asu. The temperature plunged in a matter of moments until it froze both the walls and his sphere. She saw fear in his eyes, something unheard-of. Her attack was working. She had to press on to gain the advantage. She concentrated and surrounded him with water. At its touch the storm froze, with Asu inside it. The temperature went on dropping, and soon Asu was no more than a heap of ice and frost.

For a moment nothing happened. He was buried in ice. She could not believe it. Then suddenly the pile of ice exploded in a thousand pieces. Under it appeared an erupting volcano. Asu took a step forward out of the center of the volcano and approached Kyra, who was gaping at him in disbelief. He came forward until their two spheres touched.

Nothing can defeat me! I am a God! I am invincible!

Kyra saw the sickly swollen veins in her enemy. Realizing what was happening, she smiled.

He opened his mouth insanely wide, threw his head forward and with an animal roar sent a cone of sustained fire at her, like the breath of some fiery creature. The heat began to melt her defense of ice. She reacted by instinct and roared with all her might. From her mouth issued a frozen cone of ice, like the breath of some giant of the icy mountains. Ice and fire met and fought to gain the upper hand. Asu roared, increasing the intensity of his cone of fire, but Kyra's ice was more powerful. Water defeated Fire. Little by little the cone of ice gained ground on fire, until it devoured it.

Curse you! Asu yelled, angered beyond belief to see her overpowering him.

He began to move his arms and utter words of Power. But he stopped. He doubled up with pain and suffered a spasm. But his rage prevailed, and he pressed on with his attack. She guessed something really bad was coming. She was just a step away from him. She could see the madness in his fiery eyes.

Behind you, came Adamis' voice.

She turned. Adamis appeared from the mist. He threw her his sword: the sword Aruma had given him.

It is now or never, he said and fell helpless on the floor.

Asu smiled when he saw Adamis appear. His eyes shone with the gleam of victory.

You are mine at last! he cried in ecstasy.

Kyra seized the sword by the hilt in mid-flight. A moment before a meteor of rock and fire fell on her, she used the sword with a well-judged stroke aimed at Asu's neck. The Golden did not flinch; his face showed only pure satisfaction and confidence.

Steel can do nothing to me!

But to his infinite surprise, the sword went through the defensive sphere and its tip pierced his neck.

At the same moment the meteor fell on Kyra with tremendous force, destroying her defense and leaving her lying on the floor, writhing in pain amid rock and fire.

Asu took two steps back, gaping at the sword which was buried in his neck.

It is… impossible… he stammered. He stumbled, but recovered. *You cannot kill me…*

"You're wrong there," came a voice behind him. He turned. Out of the shadows came Albana. She seized the sword by the hilt and plunged it in sharply.

No! he cried, eyes staring in terror, his hands reaching for his neck. He stepped back, recovered and drew his sword. He threw it on the floor.

Albana went back to Kyra and helped her to her feet.

Asu covered the wound with one hand. *This will not kill me!*

He tried to use his Power, but a spasm of pain made him fall to the floor, where he began to shake.

Noooooo! What is this? What is happening to me?

Kyra limped up to him, bleeding from many cuts, with Albana at her side. "This is the end for you."

Asu stretched out his arm. The sickly veins had taken over his body.

I am a God, the most powerful of all!

"You're nothing," Kyra said. "You've used your Power freely, thinking that the Claw and the discs with the life-essence of the slaves would cancel the price that needed to be paid for the use of the Power. And it's true, you won't age. But in your absolute arrogance and utter stupidity, you didn't consider that your body was poisoned, yours and those of all the Golden. And every time you used your Power, Aruma's poison spread faster through your body."

Nooooo! Again Asu tried to use his Power, but he began to shake.

“The toxin is killing you,” Albana said. “It’s lucky we hybrids are immune.”

I will kill you! he howled, but the poison had nearly killed him. From his open mouth, black blood began to dribble.

“No,” Kyra said, “you’re the one who’s going to die.” She went over to Adamis and helped him to his feet. “And I want you to die knowing that Adamis and the other hibernating Golden will be saved.”

No! Arghhhh! He began to cough blood.

I offered you my hand, Adamis said. *I gave you the chance to save yourself.*

To hell with you! I will kill you!

“Go, my love, save yourself,” Kyra said to her beloved.

He nodded and left the chamber.

Seeing himself defeated and his enemy heading toward salvation, Asu cried out with all his remaining might:

Noooooooooo!

Overcome by a fit of rage, he began to shake and cough up blood until he died.

“For my mother,” said Albana.

“For my mother,” said Kyra, “and for Yosane, Idana, Urda, Liriana, Maruk and all the others.”

The two friends looked at Asu’s body for a long moment. Then they exchanged a glance of satisfaction, took the sword, and with a long, two-handed stroke they cut off his head.

Chapter 40

And the moment arrived. It came before they expected it. Time flew by while the Healers and Erudites treated the wounds of the group in the Chamber of Hibernation.

We need to hurry, the oldest of the Erudite said. *We must go into hibernation now, or it will be too late.*

Adamis stood up with a grimace of pain. *Very well*.

Everything is ready, the Erudite went on. He indicated the great golden sphere in the center of the room, which was spinning with a rhythmic murmur, barely audible. *The inner chamber will close and remain sealed. Nobody will be able to go in or out of it until the moment comes.* He gestured in the direction of the door at the far end, which gave access to the inner chamber where the rest of the Golden had already gone into hibernation.

Thank you. I understand.

The Erudite indicated the crystalline floor. *Our brothers are waiting for us.*

Ikai gazed at the sleepers through the crystal floor. The underground chamber was immense, vanishing into the depths. The Golden floated amid a golden luminescence, sleeping peacefully so as not to die, waiting for the day when they would be reawakened to go back to the surface.

Once the door is closed, there will be no way back, the Erudite said.

“We will seal the antechamber,” Ikai reassured them. “Nobody will ever reach this place.”

One final detail. Adamis made a sign to the Priests, who came closer. *These will be the watchers of sleep*, he told them, with a wave toward Ikai and Albana. The three Priests solemnly handed them the Medallion of Shadows, the Tome of the Sun and the Tome of the Moon.

The two books fit into the pedestal in the antechamber and the Medallion in the round door, Adamis explained. *Once the three are located in their places, use the Power to activate them and they will seal this chamber from outside. Nothing and nobody will be able to open it. When you do this, take the objects away and hide them. They must never be found, since they are the means of getting here and re-opening it. The only means.*

"We'll protect them with our lives," Albana assured him.

He nodded. *Thank you, both of you.*

The three Priests, the Erudites and the last Healers passed through the circular door and into the Chamber of Hibernation.

"Good luck," Ikai said.

Adamis was the last Golden remaining to cross. He looked beneath his feet and sighed deeply.

I hope we survive, he said, It would be a sad end for our civilization.

"You will survive, the secret will be safe with us," Ikai promised.

Adamis was moved by this farewell. *Thank you… for everything… I do not know how to…*

"There's no need. We're friends," Ikai said, and embraced him. The High King of the House of Ether embraced him in return. Then he embraced Albana, who kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear: "I'll take care of Kyra and keep the secret of the Golden."

I will never be able to repay this… you have given me so much…you have taught me so much… we have been a race of foolish self-obsessed maniacs…

Kyra kissed him with all her heart.

"Not all of you," she said, smiling broadly. "There are one or two among you with good hearts who deserve a second chance."

I love you.

"And I love you too, my arrogant prince."

Promise me, my love, that you will live a full life, that you will not waste your life over my memory.

She forced a smile through the tears that were running down her cheeks. "I promise. As soon as you go into hibernation I'm going in search of

another prince.”

Adamis laughed at this. *You are impossible*.

“That’s why you love me,” she said, and held him tightly once more.

For that, and a thousand reasons more.

They kissed passionately in a last heart-wrenching embrace. Suddenly there came a crack and the door to the Chamber of Hibernation began to descend.

Kyra nodded towards the door. “Quickly.”

Adamis gave her one last kiss and went to the round door, which was inexorably descending. He turned to wave goodbye and went in. The door would close in one more moment.

“Sorry brother, I love you both, take care of yourselves!” Kyra said suddenly, and hurled herself under the closing door. Her body slid along the crystalline floor and under the door a second before it shut after her.

Ikai ran to the door “Nooooo!” he cried. But the door had closed and was sealed. There was no way he could open it.

“Kyra!” he called.

Albana hurried to his side and took his hand.

“We have to do something,” he said. “We have to get her out of there.”

“No, my love. It’s her life, not ours.”

“But she’ll die in there.”

“We don’t know that. It’s her decision, not ours. We must respect it.”

And as they spoke, beneath their feet they saw Kyra and Adamis floating, hand in hand, with a look of utter peace and happiness.

Ikai sighed and let his sister follow her heart.

Epilogue

Dawn found Ikai gazing out at Oxatsi, Mother Sea. His arms were around his beloved, and he was lost in the beauty of the sea at daybreak.

Suddenly he felt an icy pain in his forearm. Surprised, he saw that the tattoo of the tree had awakened and was giving out a reddish mist.

“The Witch of the Lake,” Albana said in warning.

“Yes, Aruma…” he said as the mist began to show him an image. As it cleared, it showed them Aruma. She was under the Great monolith in Alantres, in the High Chamber where the Five High Kings had met, surrounded by two rings of acolytes. The first and larger ring included most of them. They were all dead, consumed. The second, made up of a dozen elderly Golden, were still alive. These must be the Ancients, the leaders.

“What can she want?”

“I have a feeling that it won’t be good news.”

The image finished forming. *The young tiger and his companion the panther,* Aruma greeted them. *I am glad to find you alive.*

“What do you want of us?” Ikai asked.

I wanted to say goodbye.

“Why? Why us?”

Ah! My young tiger, because you two are very special. You, Ikai, are very special.

“Stop playing games. We know you’ve used us for your own purposes.”

The same way you used this old crazy witch for yours. Or didn’t I save your mother, or Adamis? Or didn’t I help you when you fought the Golden?

“But in the end you betrayed us.”

Me? Betray you? No, my dear tiger, I have never betrayed Men.

“Well, you betrayed the Golden,” Albana put in.

The panther has a point. But it's not a betrayal, it's a new dawn, a rebirth. A new era which will change the fate of Golden and Men.

"You could have relied on us."

Could I? she said with a grimace, as though she were considering it. *I don't think so.*

"You never asked, so you'll never know what our answer would have been."

Luckily I've been on this earth for many years – too many – and I can guess what your answer would have been.

"Even so," Ikai insisted.

This is the dawn of the Rebirth, she said, spreading her arms wide. Her face was jubilant. *A glorious day. The Golden, as we knew them, have ceased to exist. Let me show you.*

She showed them an image of Alantres. Thousands of Golden lay dead throughout the eternal city. The image was apocalyptic. The five rings were covered with corpses.

Ikai shook his head. "How could you cause a horror like that?"

To be fair, most of them died because of the war, which I had nothing to do with.

"And the survivors?" Albana accused her. "Those you did kill?"

Those degenerates of the House of Hila were killing them, to use them in their abominable rituals of death. They're corpse-eaters. They wouldn't have left many alive, none at all in the long run. The image now showed them a large number of dead Golden, all dressed in black robes. They were members of the House of Death. *To be honest, I'm not sorry they've died. They worshiped death. They were an aberration.*

"And the other innocents?" Ikai asked. "They didn't deserve to die."

They're the price that has to be paid for a new beginning. A great good requires a great sacrifice.

"I don't approve."

I know, my young tiger. But perhaps you will approve of this. The image changed to show thousands of slaves on the shores of the continent. Their faces were joyful, their arms raised, and they were shouting jubilantly.

Albana recognized their clothes. “The slaves of Alantres!”

Yes, Aruma said. She smiled broadly. *I liberated them from the catacombs. My people led them to the Royal Portals, and we’ve taken them to the mainland so that they can return to their homes.*

Ikai was puzzled. “Thank you … that’s wonderful, but I don’t understand. Why?”

Because it’s the right thing to do. There will be no slaves in the Rebirth of the Golden. Both men and Golden will live freely, respecting the laws of Mother Nature.

Ikai and Albana exchanged blank looks.

Aruma gave them a strange smile. *And now what? Am I still a heartless murderer?*

Ikai was trying to avoid getting mixed up with the game the Leader of the Children of Arutan was playing. “We’re grateful to you for saving the slaves.”

This old witch is sure the panther – she indicated Albana – *would approve of killing all the Golden in order to free the slaves. Isn’t that what I’ve done? Wouldn’t you approve, Albana?*

The brunette was about to answer, but thought better of it and remained silent. Her eyes met Ikai’s.

You see, young tiger I’m not evil, and neither am I good.

“I don’t approve of what you’ve done,” Ikai said, “but I give you credit for saving thousands of slaves. That I won’t forget.”

Oh, but you will.

“I promise you I won’t.”

And I promise you will, Aruma said with a malicious giggle.

He tensed. Albana reached for her two daggers.

“What do you mean?” Ikai asked.

I must make sure you won’t hunt down the Children of Arutan. The Children of the Rebirth.

“Those who’ve survived… the ones who are immune to your poison.”

Yes, those. Only you know they exist, and only you could go after them and kill them.

“We won’t do that, I give you my word.”

I’d like to believe you, but unfortunately I can’t. So many things might happen in the future.

“I assure you…”

I can’t take that risk.

“What are you going to do?”

The old witch laughed, a cold, grim cackle. *The last step for the Rebirth has come. It’s time to erase all trace of the existence of the ancient Golden so that the Rebirth can be complete. We’ll start again from scratch, as if we had never ever set foot on this earth.*

Ikai was doubtful that this could be done. “How are you going to manage that?”

I’m going to destroy Alantres and erase all memory that the Golden ever existed from the minds of men.

He was still trying to understand what she meant to do. “No! Wait!”

It’s decided. No-one will remember anything of what happened here. Farewell!

The image centered on Aruma, who turned to face the great monolith. She made a sign to her people, and all of them sent Power to the monolith. The Power of the dozen Leaders of the Children of Arutan passed from their bodies to the Monolith. The first of them fell, consumed, and a discharge of power ran along the artifact as if it had been struck by lightning. One by one the Ancients sacrificed their lives, charging the monolith with their enormous power. Each sacrifice caused it to accumulate power, so that large flashes ran along its entire surface.

Ikai and Albana stepped back.

“It’s going to explode!” she said.

“It’ll be devastating!” As he spoke, he covered his face with his forearm. The image was so real and shocking that it seemed it was taking place right there in front of them instead of in Alantres.

Only Aruma remained standing now. She raised her arms. The Great Monolith began to flash in pulses, each more powerful than the last. She sent all her Power and fell to the ground, consumed. She was dead.

“No!” Ikai cried. But it was inevitable now. Irreversible.

There came a colossal throb. A gigantic wave of energy issued from the Great Monolith and spread in all directions. A moment later it imploded, then detonated outwards in a devastating explosion. Ikai and Albana covered their eyes; it was as if the sun itself had burst apart. The explosion completely devastated the city. Buildings shattered and flew into the air. The five rings were destroyed in a single moment. The violence of the explosions wiped out Golden, rock and sea for leagues around. Everything was razed to the ground, nothing survived.

Alantres, the Eternal City, disappeared into the ocean.

“She’s destroyed the world of the Golden!” Albana said in disbelief.

“The wave’s coming this way!” Ikai said uneasily.

The wave ran through sea and earth at an unnatural speed, reached the mainland and swept across it.

“It’s coming!” Albana cried.

Ikai put his arms round her. “By Oxatsi!” Let’s protect ourselves!”

They raised their protective spheres.

The wave shook them like a hurricane. They nearly fell, but managed to stay on their feet. And it reached the other Men in the same way, all across the continent. The Rings flashed an intense golden on contact with the energy of the wave. All fell senseless.

When they woke, they found that the rings had opened. They took them off, trying to remember what they were, but without success. They remembered who they were, but when they thought of the rings they could not remember anything about them. Nor did they remember anything about the Golden. Nothing. Not the slightest detail. Nor would they ever. Thanks to Aruma’s work.

All except for two people.

“Do you remember?” Ikai asked Albana.

“I remember everything. Every last detail.”

“The spheres protected us,” Ikai guessed, and she nodded.

They looked out toward the sea, then smiled, as though they were waking from a long nightmare. Their hearts were filled with joy.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now we’ll help Men in this new beginning.”

“And the Secret?”

“We’ll keep it. Nobody will ever know about Kyra, Adamis and the Golden. Not men, not the Children of Arutan, no-one. Not now, not ever.”

“It’ll take us more than one life…”

“We’ll prepare. For three thousand years we’ll keep the secret. We and our descendants, until the poison disappears from their bodies and they can come back.”

“Our descendants?” Albana asked, tilting her head and glancing at him mischievously.

“If you’d like it to be …”

She smiled and blushed. “I would, my love.”

“I love you so much…”

She kissed him. “And I love you, my dear.”

And with that kiss, the Secret of the Golden Gods was sealed.

---THE END BOOK3---

---THE END---

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Pedro

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